Lv Ye Qian He
The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post
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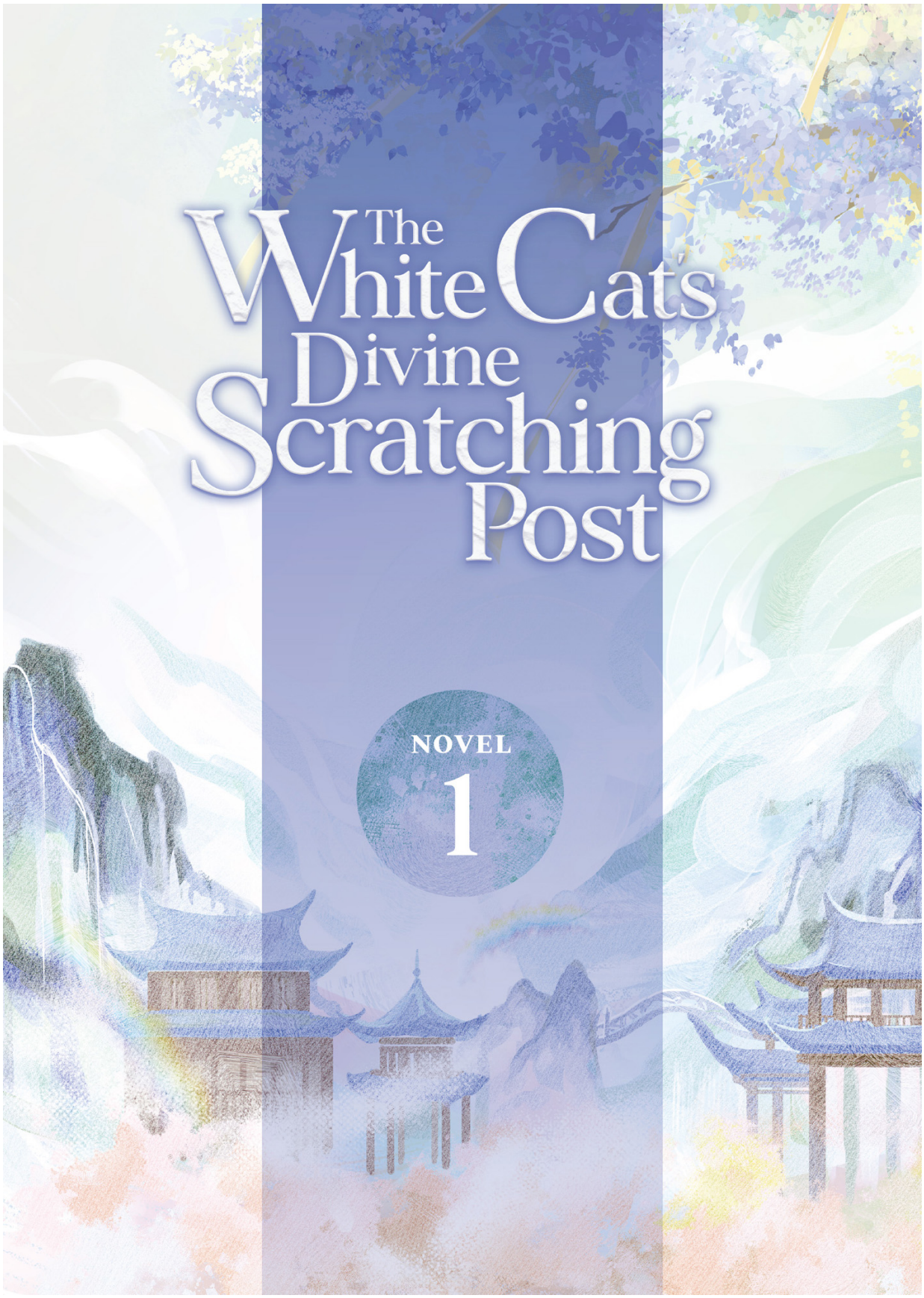
The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post
NOVEL
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Chapter 1:
Annihilation

FAR AWAY IN THE SOUTH of the Taixuan continent stood a mountain called Mount Yanhuo. It stretched a little over ninety miles around at the base, and the peak blazed with fire nearly year-round; as such, although it was covered with lush vegetation lower down, the summit was barren. It was surrounded on all sides by more towering mountains, rising majestically into the clouds.

From the north, a streak of light shot toward a deep valley. Countless specks of light, both bright and dim, followed in hot pursuit, like a swarm of hornets relentlessly chasing after the culprit who had disturbed their nest, determined to tear him to pieces.

The damaged flying ship, having reached its limit, disintegrated in midair, and Mo Tianliao was thrown to the ground. He curled into a ball and rolled to break his fall, getting grass and mud all over his already tattered black robe.

He'd landed in a valley between two mountains, on flat ground covered in verdant grass. A thick, stubby tree stood conspicuously in the center of the valley.

"Ugh…" Mo Tianliao gasped for breath and struggled to make his way over to the tree. His legs were failing him, so, supporting himself with both arms, he leaned against the tree. With some effort, he managed to sit up straight.

He had been on the run for thirty-nine days, and all his spiritual treasures were damaged or destroyed. He was a spent force, like an arrow at the end of its flight. As he tried to circulate his remaining vital energies through his meridians, a searing pain shot through his dantian, making him cough up blood.

As an illustrious artifact master of the unorthodox path, Mo Tianliao hadn't cut such a sorry figure for a long time. It had all begun when he'd decided to use some unusual materials to craft an artifact—but when he'd opened the furnace, an astronomical phenomenon had occurred that let the whole cultivation world know that the Venerable Demon Lord Duantian was about to forge a divine artifact capable of destroying the world.

"Mew!" A kittenish cry came from his bosom, and a tiny white paw reached out of his tattered black silk robe. It batted at the air until the owner realized this wasn't the collar he usually poked his head out of, but a new opening. Annoyed, he clawed at it, and a loud rip rang out as the small tear became a gaping hole. And just like that, the last part of Lord Duantian's spiritual treasure met its destruction at the paws of a cat.

"Your Lordship, this is the only piece of clothing I have left to cover myself with." Mo Tianliao wiped the corner of his mouth and looked down in resignation at the little white ball of fluff. "Can't you at least let your master die with some dignity?"

Emerging from the new opening, his traveling companion shook off the grass stuck to his paw in disgust. He was a gorgeous white kitten with unblemished fur as pure as snow and large, round eyes like orbs of glass.

The kitten crouched on Mo Tianliao's chest and observed him quietly. Mo Tianliao's handsome face was marred by streaks of blood. To a cat that

judged others by the glossiness of their fur coat, his once passable face had become much uglier. Thus, he straightened up, raised his paw, and swatted him in the face.

Mo Tianliao grabbed that little paw and kissed it. “Pawpaw, I…”

“Mo Tianliao, stop right there!” Before man and cat could exchange their last words, the swarm of hornets caught up to them. Flying swords and ships of all sorts bearing cultivators from various sects converged on the valley.

Mo Tianliao shoved the kitten into the hollow of the tree behind him and leaned lazily against it. He surveyed the crowd with a gaze as cutting as ice. Among them were his enemies, old friends, subordinates, Daoist cultivators, demonic cultivators, and even the merciful Buddhist cultivators.

“Duantian,” Elder Yunhe of the Qingyun Sect intoned righteously, stroking his snowy-white beard, “stop this futile resistance and hand over the divine artifact, and we will leave you be.”

“Drop the pretentious act, you old geezer.” Patriarch Kugu of the Wangui Sect cackled and raised a black flag at Mo Tianliao. “If you’re smart, you’ll hand over the divine artifact and I’ll kill you quickly. Otherwise, I’ll give you a taste of my Souleater Banner!”

Everyone near him hastily stepped back.

Weapons were broadly classified into six grades. Common blades of the mortal world were simply called physical weapons, while the ones cultivators used were called magical artifacts. Of those, the weapons that could be controlled through the divine soul were called treasure artifacts, while those that were nurtured by spiritual energy and could slay opponents beyond their grade were called spiritual artifacts. Then there were celestial

artifacts, weapons that could devastate hundreds with a single blow. Finally, at the very top tier were the ones capable of destroying the world altogether —the legendary divine artifacts. No one had ever seen one before, except perhaps for the one that Mo Tianliao was on the verge of completing.

The Souleater Banner in Patriarch Kugu's hand was a superior-grade spiritual artifact that could almost be considered a celestial artifact. Allegedly, it had been forged using a thousand souls of people who had died wrongful deaths. Anyone devoured by it would have their soul torn apart by countless malevolent spirits, doomed to never find release even in death.

Mo Tianliao looked at the black flag with gold foil. "The Souleater, huh… That's just a piece of trash."

"I beg your pardon?!" Patriarch Kugu blurted out in shock.

Mo Tianliao's fingers moved ever so slightly to trace the gnarled tree root on the ground. "Old Man Kugu, do you remember what you did when you begged me to make that banner?"

The color instantly drained from Patriarch Kugu's face.

Mo Tianliao had told him that this Souleater Banner needed blood from the hearts of forty-nine blood kin for it to become one with the divine soul of its wielder. Accordingly, the patriarch had slaughtered his entire clan, and when that still wasn't enough, he'd killed seven of his beloved concubines. Never in his wildest dreams had he expected to hand the bottle of fresh blood to Mo Tianliao, only for the guy to nonchalantly draw a pattern with it and tell him it was actually the same using the blood from their fingertips; he'd simply preferred the aesthetics of using blood from the heart.

This incident had become an insurmountable weight on Patriarch Kugu's heart—it stunted his cultivation progress for a century.

"If someone this twisted were to possess a divine artifact, it would spell doom for the whole cultivation world," sighed the elder of Qingyun

Sect. The other cultivators from the various orthodox sects nodded in agreement.

While the demonic cultivators couldn't care less about the Qingyun Sect elder's rhetoric, they had to agree with him. The demonic path had always consisted of a loose band of individual powers. If someone with as volatile a temperament as Mo Tianliao had a divine artifact in his hands, they could all forget about living peacefully in the coming days.

A benevolent-looking Buddhist cultivator put his palms together. "Amitabha. Venerable One, you should just end your own life."

Feeling little paws clawing away at his back from the tree hollow, Mo Tianliao couldn't hold back a faint smile. "Celestial artifacts are few and far between. Have you folks ever seen one?"

A sick sense of foreboding came over the crowd. They had been hot on Lord Duantian's heels for over a month, and they'd taken heavy casualties from the man's countless spiritual artifacts. Now his trove of treasures finally seemed to be exhausted, and they'd cornered him in this secluded valley, but was it possible he still had another trick up his sleeve?

Before they could react, the dark cliffs on both sides suddenly came alive in a bright burst of light. The lush grass underfoot transformed into bloodred spikes, and countless rays of mystical light shot up from the cracks in the ground. The earth shook.

"Honored guests, behold my masterpiece." Still leaning lazily against the trunk, Mo Tianliao flashed them a breezy smile, like he was just inviting them to his house for a cup of tea.

Screams erupted from the crowd as the mystical light shredded several cultivators into a mist of blood.

“Stop it, Duantian!” Realizing what was happening, the Qingyun Sect elder summoned his flying sword and leaped into the air. Those with higher cultivation followed suit, but the weaker or slower cultivators were not so lucky. Before those in the air could sigh in relief, though, a hum reverberated through the air. A barrier of light like an inverted wok formed, spanning the tops of both cliffs and cutting off their escape routes. Then it began to shrink and close in on them.

“Oh no! If we touch that dome of light, we’ll also end up…” Terror gripped their hearts at the sight of the severed limbs strewn all over the ground.

“This is called the Annihilation Valley, a superior-grade celestial artifact with a zero-miss record.” Mo Tianliao introduced his masterpiece with great relish. It was the perfect tool for mutual destruction, so named because everything in the valley would be obliterated, regardless of status or cultivation level. Even the celestial artifact itself would be destroyed.

“Duantian, you lunatic!”

“Oh, Venerable One, please spare us! We only did such a foolish thing because we were instigated!”

“Please, Lord—”

“Duantian!”

Curses, pleas, and screams filled the air along with spray after spray of blood.

Mo Tianliao slid down the trunk and pressed his face into the fist-sized hollow, the only safe spot in the valley. He had meant to leave his last will there, but it had ended up as the perfect place to leave his cat.

“It’s a good thing we haven’t signed a blood pact yet,” he whispered, planting a kiss on the furry head inside. “Take care of yourself when I’m gone. Don’t let anyone catch you… Learn how to catch fish on your own, and don’t get so caught up in playing that you skip meals…”

His nagging voice grew softer and softer. He had sustained a fatal injury three days ago, and it had finally become too much for him. Slowly, his eyes closed.

“Mew?” The white kitten patted his face, but the fool who always smiled and nuzzled him when he woke him up never opened his eyes.

The light dome overhead was drawing closer, and it wouldn’t be long before this silly fool would also be reduced to a bloody mist. The kitten anxiously pawed at Mo Tianliao’s nose; when he didn’t react, he tentatively leaned over and licked him.

Look, I’ve licked you. Stop pretending to sleep, or I’ll beat you up! Oi!

But the affection it expected never came, only an increasingly blinding light.

Boom! A thunderous explosion rocked through the mountain, turning the entire valley into ruins. Rocks toppled. Grass burned to cinders. Severed limbs littered the ground, and blood flowed in rivers. Only a bare, stunted tree stood tall and untouched.

You’ll be mine from now on…

Whoa, can you believe a pretty kitty like this is a boy?

From now on, your name is Pawpaw. Stop scratching me. Ouch, ow, ow, ow…

Your Lordship, it's time for fish. Give me a kiss—ouch, ow, ow, ow…

"Mew…mew…"

The kitten's tiny cries echoed across the empty valley for a long time, but the man who would always unashamedly lean in for a clawing was gone.

Chapter 2:
Undying Tree

IN TAIXUAN, there were two kinds of people: common folks and cultivators. Cultivators harnessed the spiritual energy of the universe through their cultivation, hoping to gain enlightenment and ascend to the heavens.

To seek immortality was to defy the laws of nature. After a cultivator successfully established their foundation, their three ethereal souls and seven corporeal souls, which comprised their spiritual and carnal sides, would gradually fuse into a complete divine soul. Without the ethereal and corporeal souls, there would be no reincarnation or next life. If the body was destroyed and the divine soul couldn’t find a new vessel within the brief span of three breaths, it would perish.

Mo Tianliao had attained a high level of cultivation before his demise, and so of course he understood these principles. So, when a bolt of spring thunder jolted him awake after months of drifting in a daze, Mo Tianliao was flummoxed.

A divine soul separated from its body was like thin ice exposed under the scorching midsummer sun—so fragile and vulnerable that even a gust of wind could scatter it away into the air. Yet here he was, floating around with his consciousness and memories intact. He looked around. He was still within the boundaries of Mount Yanhuo, though he couldn’t discern his exact location.

Tentatively extending a wisp of his divine soul, he found himself encased by a gentle power, like an insect sealed in amber, safe and sound.

Though conscious, he was still just a translucent orb of light with no powers, so he could only float aimlessly where the wind blew among the mountains.

This went on for centuries.

By the thirtieth year since he'd regained consciousness, Mo Tianliao learned to alter the direction he drifted in using the feeble power of his divine soul. But he couldn't go to populated areas for fear of being recognized by the powerful cultivators, so he remained around Mount Yanhuo, exploring every inch of the mountain range within a hundred miles.

On the barren heights of Mount Yanhuo, where flames burned throughout the year, there stood a huge, solitary tree. It was straight and slender and about thirty feet tall, with a solid, huggable girth. It was also devoid of branches, save for one thick branch that seemed to have been scorched. Flames always erupted on Mount Yanhuo during the fourth month and burned out by the twelfth month, so in the brief period of early spring when the peak wasn't ablaze, tender leaves would sprout on this branch until the fire reignited.

Mo Tianliao had been refining artifacts for many years, so he could recognize precious materials at a glance. He could barely contain his elation when he saw the intense flames burning around this lone tree without ever razing it.

It was an ancient divine tree, the undying wood!

Undying meant perpetual regeneration. This divine tree could serve as a physical body!

He didn’t know where the power protecting him had come from, but since he wasn’t completely dead, he had to find and claim a suitable body as a vessel for rebirth. A child with excellent aptitude would have been fine, but even the best attributes couldn’t be compared to an ancient divine tree!

Aptitude was important for cultivation. The better the basal attributes, the fewer cultivation bottlenecks one would face, and the higher the chances of attaining immortality. The heaven attribute was the best of them. Those with this attribute absorbed natural energies the fastest and were most likely to achieve insights and enlightenment.

However, a corporeal body made of the undying tree would far surpass one naturally born with the heaven attribute. As an ancient divine tree, it was a natural spiritual entity born of the universe, so it could absorb the spiritual energies of the natural world utterly uninhibited.

Mo Tianliao circled the tree repeatedly. This was probably the world’s only undying tree, and he was reluctant to give it up. All he needed was a single bolt of heavenly lightning to strike him into it, and he could take his time to refine it into his own body.

Any other soul wouldn’t have the capability to possess a block of wood, but he was different. During those centuries of disembodiment, he’d tempered his soul to be exceptionally strong and secure, so withstanding a bolt of heavenly lightning would be a piece of cake.

Everything was in place except for that final step—Mo Tianliao now needed a bolt of lightning to strike him.

Of course, just wanting to be struck by lightning wouldn’t summon a storm. So, with patience honed by his time as a master artificer, Mo

Tianliao kept watch by the divine tree, looking forward to the day lightning would come calling.

Flowers bloomed and withered; tides ebbed and flowed. His vigil lasted a hundred years.

Boom! An earth-shattering thunderclap crashed through the gray, cloudy sky. Mo Tianliao hurriedly drifted upward, narrowly missing a streak of lightning that scorched the earth barren for miles around.

The lightning he'd been waiting for had finally arrived, but it was a barrage of Mystic Thunderbolts from the Nine Heavens, which meant some unlucky soul was undergoing their heavenly tribulation. Mo Tianliao fought the urge to curse.

A heavenly tribulation was the last step in the quest for immortality. Survive the lightning, and one could attain the Great Dao and become immortal. However, not all lightning tribulations were created equally. Some were like drizzles, mere shows of formality that let the cultivator off easy, while others were relentless, earth-shattering bolts intent on striking the cultivator dead. And these particular Mystic Thunderbolts of the Nine Heavens? They clearly belonged to the latter category.

Hoping to piggyback off someone else's tribulation, Mo Tianliao mustered whatever meager soul force he had and expended all his efforts in dodging. The heavenly lightning raged for a day and a night before it gradually weakened. Seeing his chance, Mo Tianliao gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut, and threw himself onto the divine tree.

Crack! An earth-splitting roar wrenched through the very depths of his soul, and Mo Tianliao felt his divine soul being ripped apart and then

forcibly embedded into something solid. The pain was so intense he wanted to scream, but without a body, he couldn’t make a sound.

The ancient divine tree instinctively rejected the invading soul. Despite the excruciating pain threatening to tear him apart, Mo Tianliao braced himself hard to maintain a semblance of clarity and did his best to integrate himself into the undying tree.

Time trickled by. Mo Tianliao’s divine soul was growing weaker, but the undying tree showed no sign of giving in. Was this the end? *No!* He hadn’t waited for a century just to be consumed by the divine tree!

The mysterious force protecting his divine soul seemed to sense his struggle and relaxed its grip, sending a warm stream of energy through his soul to merge into it and soothe him. Once the force and his soul were fused, the divine tree stopped repelling him.

The Mystic Thunderbolts of the Nine Heavens went on for seven days and seven nights. Whoever that unlucky cultivator undergoing his tribulation was, he had to be cinders by now.

The torrential rainstorm passed, and the skies cleared up. Coincidentally, this took place in the third month, when the mountaintop wasn’t on fire. The budding undying tree shrank, morphing into an impeccably handsome man with chiseled features and a tall, slender figure. This was Mo Tianliao, the man who had successfully made the undying tree his body.

Finally standing on solid ground after centuries of drifting, Mo Tianliao felt the impulse to howl at the sky. But first, he needed clothes. The divine tree had given him human form, but clothing hadn’t been included in the package.

Flexing his stiff limbs, he strode over to the massive crater halfway up the mountain. The lightning tribulation that had lasted seven days and seven nights had not only obliterated that unlucky cultivator but also wiped out everything in the vicinity.

Cautiously, he scanned the area with his divine soul, but he didn't detect the divine soul of the cultivator. He heaved a sigh of relief. It would be a gross injustice if he were to be body-snatched right after coming back to life. A grin spread across his face. It was pretty rare for a divine soul to survive intact under these circumstances. He'd really lucked out big time.

Mo Tianliao scavenged around the crater. Most of the cultivator's spiritual treasures had been destroyed, and after digging around for some time, all he managed to find was an inventory bracelet. The bracelet was black, with no discernible grade. Since its cultivator was dead, the soul imprint on it had vanished too, allowing Mo Tianliao easy access to the contents within.

The storage space within wasn't very big. All it contained was a small collection of spiritual stones and a few sets of clothes. Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow, his expression subtly shifting. This bracelet was a magical artifact he'd refined in his past life. The bracelet didn't have a time-freeze function, so it couldn't preserve spiritual herbs and elixirs, and its inventory space was limited. Its only use was its ability to resist lightning tribulations. This cultivator had probably bought the bracelet for that reason, but unluckily for him, this so-called lightning resistance feature applied only to the bracelet itself. Its owner could still get struck by lightning.

Mo Tianliao rubbed his nose and observed a moment of silence for this poor cultivator who'd gotten screwed over. Then, he took out a set of

dark-colored clothes and examined it to make sure it didn't have a sect identifier and that it wasn't some high-level magical treasure. It didn't, and it wasn't, so he put it on.

With clothes and money, he was ready to leave the mountain. "Let's go!" In high spirits, Mo Tianliao snapped his fingers—and his fingers burst into flames.

Mo Tianliao stared wide-eyed at the vividly colored flame at his fingertips. It had a green tint to it, and if he wasn't mistaken, this was… woodfire!

Nature occasionally produced strange fires, like stonefire, icefire, and so on. These sorts of fires were created by other elemental entities, so the fire would also carry some of these other attributes. To his surprise, millennia of being burned by intense fire had allowed the undying tree to create woodfire. And since this fire was imbued with the regenerative power of the undying tree, it could preserve the spiritual energy of any materials he used to refine artifacts.

In his previous life, he'd never been able to get his hands on this woodfire—and now it had been delivered to him on a silver platter. Mo Tianliao was momentarily dumbstruck.

After spending a few more days getting used to this unexpected blessing, Mo Tianliao set off for the Annihilation Valley.

So many cultivators had perished here, and the air was so thick with lingering resentment that his fragile divine soul hadn't even been able to approach it before. Now that he had a new body, he had to check it out.

The valley was a scene of utter devastation. The only thing remaining was that stunted tree, standing alone by itself. Mo Tianliao crouched beside

it and touched the fist-sized hollow in its trunk. It had been a very long time, and his cat was long gone.

Mo Pawpaw had been a spirit beast with exceptional aptitude. When Mo Tianliao had found him, he'd considered making him his servant beast, but his affection for the little guy had won out. If Pawpaw didn't want to sign a blood pact with him, he wouldn't force him to. He wondered how that pampered little creature was doing without him there to care for him.

He wanted to look for him, but the world was vast, and without the bond of a blood pact, Mo Tianliao didn't know where to start his search. Although he still had the full powers of his divine soul, his body had almost no cultivation. He was so weak he was practically incapable of exacting vengeance. Mo Tianliao sighed. There was nothing for it: He'd have to join a sect so he could regain his cultivation.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: I've scored myself a golden ticket, wa ha ha!

Pawpaw: What?

Woodworker: An all-natural wood element!

Pawpaw: Perfect for sharpening my claws.

Woodworker: I also have super-duper amazing woodfire!

Pawpaw: Perfect for grilling a fish for me.

Woodworker: *speechless*

Chapter 3:
Sect

MOUNT YANHUO lay in the extreme south, far removed from both the orthodox sects and the unorthodox cultivators' strongholds. In his previous body, it had taken Mo Tianliao nearly two weeks fleeing on his flying ship—a superior-grade spiritual artifact—to reach this remote corner.

Scratching his head, Mo Tianliao turned and went up the mountain to dig up a few century-old fire ginsengs.

Mount Yanhuo had rather unique terrain, abundant with rare materials and spiritual herbs. Over the years, Mo Tianliao had familiarized himself with these treasures' locations. He lacked a suitable inventory device to preserve the spiritual energy of these valuable items, though, and he didn't have the power to protect them from being looted, either, so he settled for harvesting some low-grade fire ginseng that could be sold to the general masses.

After a few days of walking, he finally left Mount Yanhuo behind and came to a small mortal town at the foot of the mountain. It was a bustling town, with a constant stream of merchants trading medicinal herbs.

Mo Tianliao found a medicinal herb shop and sold the fire ginsengs for a few hundred taels of silver. He tossed the money into his bracelet, then went off in search of a tavern for a meal and to find out the current date.

"Waiter, I've been gathering herbs in the mountains for months. Is it the new year yet?" Mo Tianliao smiled at the waiter serving his food.

“Oh dear, you must have lost track of time. It’s already the beginning of the third month.” The waiter grinned back at him. “It’s now the 8,371st year of the Taixuan calendar.”

“Is that so…” Mo Tianliao nodded and picked up his chopsticks to take a bite of his food. When he died, it had been the 8,024th year. Had it really been over three hundred years?

“Hey, have you heard? The cultivation sects are recruiting disciples!” A loud conversation from the table beside him snapped him out of his thoughts.

“Really?! I should give it a try!” someone replied.

“You? You’re almost thirty—who’d want you?” His friend laughed in his face. “They only accept young people under sixteen with elemental attributes, so unless you have extraordinary aptitude…”

Mo Tianliao finished his meal and left the tavern to see a crowd hurrying toward the town center, chatting excitedly about the cultivators. He followed them and, from a distance, spotted several haughty-looking young cultivators standing in the middle of the crowd. They were all wearing the same azure cultivator robes: undoubtedly all members of the Qingyun Sect. He frowned despite himself. Demonic cultivators mainly resided in the south, and this town was closer to their domains than the orthodox sects. Why would these orthodox sects come all the way here to recruit disciples?

“We have first dibs on this young man!” A young woman in a light blue wide-sleeved dress spoke up from behind him in a sweet voice. She strode over, followed by several men in blue cultivator robes.

This was getting interesting. Of all the orthodox sects in the world, the strongest were the Three Great Clouds Sects: Qingyun Sect, Liuyun Sect, and Woyun Sect, also known as Azure Clouds, Drifting Clouds, and Bountiful Clouds. People from both Qingyun Sect and Liuyun Sect had appeared in this town, both interested in the same young man with promising aptitude.

The Qingyun disciple in the lead held his junior back from arguing with her. “Excuse me, we were here first, and we have already met his parents. They have given their consent for him to join our Qingyun Sect. What do you mean you have first dibs?”

“I set my eyes on him yesterday!” the young woman replied, holding her chin high.

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow, anticipating a fight. He wasn’t all that fond of these two sects; they were among those who’d hunted him down before. In Mo Tianliao’s opinion, Qingyun Sect was a pack of hypocrites, while Liuyun Sect was a gang of petty lowlifes.

“I see. In that case, did you leave him a token as proof—” But the young man from Qingyun Sect suddenly paused and looked up at the crowd.

“What’s wrong?” asked the junior disciple behind him.

The young man shook his head. “Perhaps I was mistaken.” The spiritual attribute-detecting magical artifact in his hand had buzzed, but when he tried to identify the source, it went still.

Mo Tianliao slipped away from the crowd and quickly made his escape. He had no intention of ever joining these two sects. When he’d sensed the detector earlier, his hair had stood on end, and he’d instinctively

suppressed his aura. Surprisingly enough, the magical artifact had stopped moving. This body made from the divine tree was very handy.

Although he'd been a demonic cultivator in his previous life, he didn't plan on returning to that path right now. Among the demonic cultivators, might made right; for a small fry like he was now, the early stages would be pretty rough. The orthodox sects that were all about face and decorum were more appealing. At least food and lodging were provided, and the master wouldn't beat or scold their disciples for no reason.

More importantly… Mo Tianliao held up a mirror he'd bought from a stall and sighed. The wood he'd possessed had naturally taken on the form of his divine sense. Before, he'd had the dual attributes of earth and fire, which were excellent for crafting weapons and artifacts but only average for cultivation. Consequently, it had taken him until he was twenty-seven or twenty-eight to establish his foundation, and his appearance had remained frozen at that age. In his new body, he looked about twenty again…but his face was still unmistakably recognizable.

Few in the cultivation world had ever seen him. Most of those who had perished in the Annihilation Valley. But all the same, there was still a chance that someone might recognize him. The notoriously mysterious Woyun Sect was his best option.

He bought a good horse and rode it to a big city about thirty miles away. If his memory served him right, there was a decent cultivation marketplace there, where he could rent spiritual mounts. Flying ships and flying swords were all treasure artifacts and above, and as such they required a divine soul and spiritual power to control—both of which were beyond him now. He cheaply rented a horrendous-looking bird and flew for

twenty days before arriving at the scenic landscape where Woyun Sect was located—the Blessed Realms, where twenty-two snowcapped mountains towered tall and majestic amidst lingering swirls of drifting clouds and mist.

It was the last day of recruitment for the year, and a crowd of aspiring cultivators hoping to join the sect had gathered in front of the mountain gate. Of course, there were also vendors peddling tea and snacks.

Mo Tianliao had been to the other two Great Clouds sects in his previous life, but never Woyun Sect. Unlike the magnificent entrances that the other two sported, Woyun Sect didn't have a plaque carved out of high-quality white jade or a giant sword sculpted from black crystal. All they had was a round rock, ten feet across, inscribed with the words *Woyun Sect*. Behind it, a path of stone steps stretched deep into the mountain mists.

It was practically a given for first-time visitors to ridicule this shabby decoration. A few young men who'd come here to join were pointing at the unsightly stone and whispering among themselves.

"This sect looks so poor…"

Mo Tianliao glanced at the ten-foot-tall Rebound Rock and wondered how they'd react if they learned that a piece of it the size of a fist was worth a hundred high-grade spiritual stones.

A commotion suddenly broke out behind him. Mo Tianliao instinctively stepped aside as a fiery red blur shot past him through the gate and leaped up the stone steps in a panic.

"Stop right there!" Several cultivators with swords on their backs followed in hot pursuit.

A loud hum rang out. That big, unassuming rock began to glow faintly. The cultivators were violently repelled in an instant, sent crashing to the ground. The little red fox stopped running and perched smugly on the stone steps, swishing its tail as it watched the show.

The cultivators scrambled to their feet and summoned their flying swords to continue their chase, but the same invisible force threw them back again.

“Who’s stirring up trouble here?!” a deep voice boomed, and three cultivators in different colored robes approached. The speaker was the man in the lead. One of the other two, a lovely young girl, picked up the fox in her arms.

“That spirit beast belongs to us!” the sword-wielding cultivators protested.

“The Rebound Rock reacts to killing intent. So, pray tell, what do you mean by drawing weapons at our gate?” said the first speaker, a man with narrow eyes. His voice was imbued with the powerful aura of his vital force, and it was clear that his cultivation surpassed the pursuers’.

The overzealous cultivators finally realized they’d somehow managed to chase the fox all the way to the entrance of Woyun Sect. Spirit beasts were valuable and highly coveted by all, but as disciples of a small sect, they couldn’t afford to offend Woyun Sect, so they gritted their teeth and apologized. “Forgive us for our offense, but please return that fox to us.”

“The law in Taixuan is that whoever catches a spirit beast owns it. It’s mine now.” The girl cradled the fox in her arms and grinned. The little fox, understanding her words, cooed in agreement.

The pursuers hesitated, clenching their jaws, but eventually left in resentment, putting an end to this brief interlude.

The three Woyun Sect cultivators were actually here to gauge the spiritual attributes of the hopeful applicants. There were no complicated procedures. The man with narrow eyes briefly explained the rules, then had the crowd queue up to be tested by his junior. The girl, meanwhile, paid no attention to proceedings and played with her fox.

Cultivators began as mortal folks, so they came in all shapes and sizes, but these three from Woyun Sect were strikingly attractive. Between that and the distinguished aura that came with cultivating the orthodox arts, they looked positively divine. A few boys' eyes bulged out of their heads as they gawked at the girl.

Mo Tianliao was at the end of the line, so by the time it was his turn, four hours had passed.

"Hand out, please," the third sect member, a gentle-looking man, said to him. Mo Tianliao complied and extended his left hand, and the man produced a beautiful three-inch-long crystalline ruler.

Mo Tianliao's pupils contracted. This ruler was his handiwork. He'd made it out of boredom as a toy for Pawpaw. It could detect the spiritual attributes of humans, as well as those of spirit beasts.

"Dual attributes of wood and fire," the man announced. As expected —an ordinary attribute detector would only be able to make out his wood attribute, but this ruler could also discern his woodfire.

If Pawpaw's toy was out here in the wild, though, his demon palace must have been raided clean… Mo Tianliao sulked for a moment before he went to stand with the candidates who had superior spiritual attributes.

Spiritual attributes were sorted into the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. Typically, a person possessed one or more attributes. Dual and single attributes were considered to be superior, and single attributes that were substantial and stable were termed heaven attributes.

Those with superior and ordinary attributes were soon separated into several groups. The little girl with the fox then stood up. “You, you, you, and you—eliminated.”

“Huh? Why?” The ones she pointed out were shocked.

She ignored them and went on pointing out more people, this time eliminating two-thirds of the candidates.

“Why, though?” A stir rose among the confused crowd.

“My apologies, everyone,” the man with the narrow eyes said, smiling. “Woyun Sect only accepts those with exceptional looks. You all have excellent aptitude, though, so you can try your luck at the other sects.”

Without waiting for their reaction, he waved the rejects away, sending them flying thirty feet out. Then, he turned and led the chosen disciples up the stone steps.

The corner of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. He really couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that Woyun Sect chose their disciples based on appearance. They weren’t some unorthodox sect that practiced some kind of shady dual cultivation technique, were they?

MINI EXTRA

Pawpaw: What about me?

A little bird: You’ll debut in the next chapter, I promise!

Pawpaw: *raises claw, swats away birdy*

Woodworker: Serves you right!

Chapter 4:
Qingtong

“My name is Chifeng, the second-generation chief disciple of the sect leader. You may call me shixiong for now.” The man with narrow eyes introduced Woyun Sect’s rules to them with a smile.

The mountain range where Woyun Sect was located was called the Blessed Realms, and it was made up of three grotto-heaven realms known as sanctums and seventy-two blessed lands called sanctuaries. The three sanctum-masters were fellow disciples with the highest level of cultivation in the sect: the Perfected Ones, Xuanji-zhenren, Tianlang-zhenren, and Qingtong-zhenren. Tianlang-zhenren was the sect leader who oversaw all major and minor sect affairs.

Disciples of the second generation and below resided in the seventy-two blessed sanctuaries, while first-generation disciples directly under the tutelage of the sanctum-masters lived with their masters in the three grotto sanctums and regularly headed to the blessed sanctuaries to teach classes.

Chifeng was the head disciple of Yanlie, who in turn was the chief disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader, so he held the highest position among all the second-generation disciples. It was extremely magnanimous of him to allow the newcomers to call him “shixiong,” as they were likely to become third-generation disciples who would have to respectfully address him as “shibo” instead.[1]

They reached the end of the stone steps, where a rope bridge spanning two high cliffs swayed precariously in the wind. The bridge

looked ordinary—simple wooden planks secured with hemp ropes. It stretched one and a half miles long and didn't have any handrails to hold on to.

After what had happened at the mountain gate, no one dared to underestimate this bridge; everyone assumed it must be some kind of treasure. The corner of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched. This bridge truly wasn't a mystical artifact; it was actually just made of hemp rope and weathered wooden planks, though whoever it was who'd sat down and woven one and a half miles worth of rope was definitely…impressively tenacious.

Standing by the bridge, Mo Tianliao looked up at the seventy-two overlapping mountains surrounding the three main peaks that stood tall in the center. The place was teeming with spiritual energy, five times thicker than it had been outside the gate. The spiritual energy on the three peaks was so concentrated that it occasionally manifested as shimmering rainbows of light. Truly a marvelous place for cultivation.

Chifeng steadily stepped onto the rope bridge without using any spiritual power and gestured for the rest to follow.

At the sight of the swaying bridge and the abyss far below, the young mortals faltered.

"What? Scared, now, are we?" Chishan, the young girl cradling the fox, grinned at them. "It's fine if you're scared. Just follow the others that way." She pointed to the group of people led by a man named Chiyuan who were heading east along the mountain path, completely bypassing the bridge. These disciples had three or more spiritual attributes, making them ineligible to meet the sect leader. Instead, they would proceed directly to the various blessed sanctuaries, where those with slightly better aptitude might

be taken in by the second-generation disciples, while the less gifted would become common outer disciples.

The gifted ones with superior spiritual attributes kept quiet and stepped onto the bridge with trembling legs. The thin wooden planks secured with soft hemp rope swayed in the mountain wind like a slithering snake.

“Argh!” A scream rang out as someone grabbed Mo Tianliao’s arm. Mo Tianliao, who had been walking steadily, frowned and looked back at the ashen-faced young man behind him. Judging by his luxurious clothing, he had to come from a privileged background.

“Slow…slow down,” the young man pleaded. Never had this pampered young master of the mortal world been placed in such a predicament before.

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. “This bridge is actually more stable the faster you walk.”

“I-I don’t believe you! Just slow down!” The young man refused to let go of his arm.

The upturned corners of Mo Tianliao’s mouth slowly flattened into a straight line. He took two slow steps, then pretended to stumble.

“Eek—!” The startled young man quickly let go, fearing Mo Tianliao would drag him down with him.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me.” Before the young man could react, Mo Tianliao steadied himself and followed Chifeng to the other side, moving as effortlessly as if he were walking across solid ground.

The young man, who had hoped to use him for support, crouched on the bridge and gripped the planks tightly as he inched forward, holding up

the people behind him and forcing them to do the same.

Mo Tianliao had acted purely out of instinct, for Lord Duantian had no habit of being kind to others. He regretted it the moment he reached the other side. Would these pretentious orthodox sects find him malicious and unworthy?

Chifeng glanced at Mo Tianliao with a ghost of a smile, his eyes narrowing, while Chishan skipped over with the fox in her arms and looked up at him, grinning. “You’re an interesting one.”

Mo Tianliao was taken aback. Weren’t these orthodox sects all about camaraderie? Then why—

Before he could delve further, a streak of red light shot out of the mountains and manifested into a handsome man in a red wide-sleeved robe standing by the bridge.

“Shizun!” Chifeng and Chishan bowed in greeting to Yanlie.

“The sect leader is waiting. Why are you dawdling here?”

“It’s not our fault…” Chishan tilted her head toward the rope bridge.

Seeing the creeping tortoises on the bridge, Yanlie flew into a rage. “Useless lot!” With a wave of his hand, he flipped the already unstable long bridge over, throwing off several of the young men like dumplings being dropped into boiling water.

Screams filled the air. About thirty feet below the bridge, an intricate blue pattern suddenly glowed as a spell array activated and teleported the falling people back onto land.

Mo Tianliao was speechless.

This sect was intriguing, to say the least.

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PAST THE ROPE BRIDGE was another set of never-ending stone steps, and at the end of the stairs were three arched bridges which led to the main peaks. The group followed Yanlie onto the one in the center. The majestic bridge was built out of crystal, giving them a clear view of the birds flying far beneath them. At the end of the bridge towered an imposing grand hall inscribed with the name *Woyun Palace.* This was where Woyun Sect usually held meetings and hosted guests. The abode of Tianlang-zhenren—the sect leader—lay just behind it.

Outside the hall, second-generation disciples wearing a variety of different outfits bowed in unison when they saw Yanlie approach.

The hall was spacious and pillarless, and the polished floor was decorated with complex patterns that glowed with every step they took. In the center of the hall, a man in black-and-white wide-sleeved cultivator robes and a simple jade crown stood with his back to them, his hands clasped behind him.

Yanlie took the lead and bowed. “Greetings to the sect leader.”

The man slowly turned around, carrying himself with the air and poise of an immortal. He sported a long, distinguished beard, although he looked to be only in his thirties by mortal standards.

“You are all talents with superior aptitude, and it is our good fortune to have you with us,” Tianlang-zhenren said with an affable smile, quelling any lingering displeasure the newcomers still felt over their earlier fright.

Mo Tianliao kept his gaze lowered. Tianlang-zhenren's cultivation was unfathomable, possibly even surpassing his own in his previous life. Better to keep a low profile and avoid rousing their suspicions.

After a few more words of courtesy from the sect leader, Yanlie took over and announced the sect rules and upcoming arrangements on his master's behalf.

Most of the newcomers would be sent to the Blessed Sanctuary of a Thousand Sprouts to cultivate under the second-generation disciples there until they established their foundation. Then they would be assigned masters based on their aptitudes. However, there were exceptions. The three sanctum-masters and first-generation chief disciples were present today, and any newcomer that caught their eyes might be accepted as a personal disciple.

While all of them would be inner disciples, these personal disciples differed from the regular disciples who were selected later. Regular disciples were like students at a private school, where the teacher was responsible only for teaching lessons, while personal disciples were like apprentices who served at their masters' sides year-round and were subjected to scoldings and even beatings. Of course, the benefits far outweighed the drawbacks, as personal disciples might occasionally receive special privileges such as extra guidance or even the opportunity to learn an exclusive technique.

When Yanlie had finished his explanation, three seats of honor suddenly rose in the center of the grand hall, each with a circular platform beneath it. Tianlang-zhenren sprang into the air and settled into the seat in the middle, while his five disciples stood at the bottom.

After a moment of silence, Tianlang-zhenren frowned. “Where’s Xuanji?”

Before he’d finished asking, a black streak of light shot across the horizon, and a man in a sky-blue robe arrived with a grand procession of a dozen disciples in tow.

Xuanji-zhenren was tall and thin, with a lean, handsome face and a cold gaze that made him seem rather unapproachable. He swept into the grand hall like a gust of wind and took his seat without looking at any of them. After a slight nod to the sect leader, he lowered his gaze and remained silent.

“Well then. Everyone take a look and see if anyone catches your eye.” Tianlang-zhenren smiled and motioned for the first-generation disciples to take their pick.

Mo Tianliao looked up at the empty seat to the east, wondering why the sect leader hadn’t waited for Qingtong-zhenren before they started.

The three seats looked similar, yet each was distinct in its own way. The sect leader’s seat was simple and dignified, while Xuanji-zhenren’s seat had a layer of black silk draped over it. Qingtong-zhenren’s seat, on the other hand, was covered with white silk woven by the merfolk, completed by sheer snow-white fabric hanging at the sides. With no one in the seat and no disciples standing beneath it, it looked quite lonesome.

The amiable sect leader seemed to sense what they were thinking. “Qingtong-zhenren spends most of his time in seclusion and rarely takes disciples,” he explained.

Mo Tianliao gazed silently at the empty seat. Qingtong-zhenren’s absence only piqued his curiosity further.

Soon, two single-attribute newcomers were chosen to serve under the first-generation disciples of Xuanji and the sect leader. Another, with a heaven attribute, was taken in as a disciple by Xuanji himself.

Mo Tianliao could hear one of the young men behind him whispering to another: “As a disciple under the direct tutelage of a sanctum-master, his status will be much higher than ours.”

After everyone had made their selection, the rest had to make their way to the Blessed Sanctuary of a Thousand Sprouts. As a dual-attribute newcomer, Mo Tianliao was naturally among the leftovers.

“Hold it!” Tianlang-zhenren called out to stop the group, looking meaningfully at Mo Tianliao. “You there, step out.”

Mo Tianliao’s heart skipped a beat, but he complied and stepped forward.

But before the sect leader could say anything, a sparkling white light streaked across from the east. A disciple outside the hall announced, “Qingtong-zhenren has arrived!”

The sect leader and Xuanji-zhenren both started in surprise, while all the Woyun Sect disciples lowered their heads and bowed before the man even entered.

A snow-white figure glided through the air and descended gracefully onto the seat in the east. Dressed in a pure white robe with an outer layer of shimmering, sheer white silk, he settled into position high above the crowd, his long sheer hem fluttering as it cascaded to the ground. A flick of his sleeve revealed a glimpse of his long, slender fingers, as fair as white jade. Just then, a slight breeze parted the sheer gauze curtain before his seat, revealing a handsome face so exquisite and flawless it left no room for

critique. He was a sight so ethereal, like a frigid spring on snowy peaks; a visage most distinguished, standing aloft where no man could reach. Mo Tianliao had seen countless beauties in his previous life, but none could compare to the man before him now. And if even a steadfast demon lord could be so enthralled, these inexperienced newcomers stood no chance at all.

“Hmph!” A melodious huff suddenly echoed in their ears, so faint and hard to hear that it seemed to have drifted from some time long past.

The color promptly drained from the faces of everyone who’d had the audacity to gape at Qingtong-zhenren. They quickly lowered their heads, not daring to be impetuous.

Mo Tianliao, however, couldn’t tear his eyes away. In his previous life, he’d been drawn to beautiful things, both people and treasures alike, so those who’d wanted to ingratiate themselves with him had been constantly sending him all sorts of beauties. Not a single one of them could compare to even a fraction of the beauty of this person before him. It looked like he’d been right to use those women as fire-stokers after all!

MINI EXTRA

A Day in the Life of the Demon Lord

Beauty A: I’m well-versed in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting.

Woodworker: You can go draw blueprints.

Beauty B: I have fair, slender hands.

Woodworker: You can go knead some clay.

Beauty C: I have high cultivation.

Woodworker: Oh, nice.

Beauty C: Should I serve as your dual cultivation vessel?

Woodworker: Nah, you can go stoke the fire.

Beauties: *speechless*

Woodworker: Pawpaw, let’s go sunbathing!

Chapter 5:
Shizun

THE COLD, BEAUTIFUL GAZE of the sanctum-master shifted ever so slightly to meet Mo Tianliao's eyes.

The sect leader smiled at Qingtong-zhenren. "Qingtong, what brings you out of seclusion?" he asked, in an exceedingly gentle tone. He might have sounded ingratiating if it hadn't been for his natural expression.

Qingtong-zhenren turned his gaze toward the sect leader and looked past him at Xuanji-zhenren.

Xuanji-zhenren almost imperceptibly shrank back. "Uh… I picked a heaven-attribute disciple. Do you want him?"

Qingtong-zhenren glanced at the young man kneeling at the foot of Xuanji-zhenren's seat, then turned back to Mo Tianliao.

"He's the most handsome in this batch." The sect leader smiled as he pointed at Mo Tianliao. "I was thinking of letting him follow Yanlie—"

"I'll take him." Qingtong-zhenren's clear, melodious voice tinkled like the shattering of fine Mount Kunlun jade or the first cry of a baby phoenix.

The sect leader nodded without any hesitation.

No sooner had the words left his lips than a lustrous white-jade token was tossed before Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao picked it up. On the front, the character "Qing" was engraved, and on the back was an intricate pattern with an occasional flash of spiritual glow running through it. This was

likely an access token that would allow him passage to areas protected by barriers and spell arrays.

Seeing this jade token, the sect leader—who had initially assumed Qingtong was here to accept a second-generation disciple for his current personal disciple—stiffened in surprise. “You’re taking him as a personal disciple?” Only disciples directly under his tutelage would receive this token. With it, Mo Tianliao could access most of the areas in Woqing Sanctum.

Even the usually expressionless Xuanji-zhenren’s eyes widened. Such things were not given lightly; even his newly recruited heaven-attribute disciple wouldn’t get one until he underwent a trial period and reached the foundation establishment stage.

“What?” Qingtong-zhenren glanced indifferently at the two of them. Tianlang and Xuanji promptly shut up and waved their hands, indicating they had no objections.

Mo Tianliao finally broke out of the spell that that enchanting voice held over him. Realizing what had happened, he quietly tucked the token into his sleeve. Apparently, after picking disciples based on spiritual attributes, they would choose based on looks. Those who were good-looking might even become a personal disciple. Mo Tianliao swallowed. He was seriously beginning to suspect that this sect practiced unmentionable secret cultivation techniques—maybe they even used their disciples as dual cultivation tools.

The selection concluded while he was still lost in wild speculation. Other than him, no one else was chosen based on their appearance. Mo Tianliao was, therefore, naturally at the receiving end of many jealous

gazes. He stroked his chin. To think he, the mighty demon lord, had been reduced to getting by on his looks. Tragic indeed!

The ones who hadn't been selected were led away by Chifeng and Chishan, while the chosen ones followed their masters back to their respective realms. Mo Tianliao happily followed his beautiful, brand-new shizun out of the grand hall.

Qingtong-zhenren was silent the whole way, so Mo Tianliao quietly followed behind him, taking care not to step on his long, flowing robes.

"Still haven't established your foundation?" That clear, captivating voice rang out again as they stopped at the intersection of the arched bridge.

"Yes…" Mo Tianliao couldn't understand why his master would ask such a question. As a newcomer, he shouldn't even know how to absorb spiritual energy into his own body.

Qingtong cast a sidelong glance at him. His bright, glistening eyes clearly said "trash."

Before Mo Tianliao could react, Qingtong-zhenren grabbed him by the collar and leaped, gliding in an instant across the bridge and over the towering cliff to land before the entrance to Woqing Sanctum.

The lofty main peak in the east had a stone gate about ten feet tall on the cliffside. There was no way someone with no cultivation could fly over.

As Mo Tianliao passed through the ordinary stone gate, he finally understood why the place was called the Blessed Realms. What lay beyond the entrance was not some deep, dark mountain cave, but a whole new realm entirely—a piece of heaven where blue sky stretched far and wide, where birds sang and flowers bloomed.

Here, there was yet another small mountain range, but unlike the steep cliffs outside, these were all low, rolling hills covered in lush vegetation and teeming with life. Qingning Palace, the residence of the sanctum-master, stood at its heart, nestled inside a bamboo forest. Several wooden houses, presumably the dwellings of the other disciples, dotted the surrounding hills.

Every disciple they encountered on the way bowed with their eyes lowered, and some even went as far as to kneel. Qingtong-zhenren completely ignored all of them and strode right into Qingning Palace's grand hall.

Made from high-quality, sparkling black crystal, the grand hall was a beautiful sight to behold. Sunshine filtering through the translucent walls reflected off the black-and-gold floor, seeming to dance with each step they took, which made the spacious grand hall feel a bit less desolate. The hall had few furnishings, just a long plush couch in the center and a few cushions strewn around it.

With a light wave of his sleeves, Qingtong sat on the couch and looked up at Mo Tianliao. "You…"

Realizing his master still didn't know his name, Mo Tianliao tactfully stepped forward and introduced himself. "Disciple Mo Tianliao pays his respects to Shizun."

Few in Taixuan knew his real name, and most only knew him by his title, the Venerable Demon Lord Duantian. His current doubts aside, he counted himself lucky to get to cultivate under Qingtong-zhenren's tutelage. It would cut down on his having to interact with many other people, and this sanctum-master with a high cultivation level would be able to give him

a pointer or two, unlike the second-generation disciples whose understanding of the cultivation arts wasn't even a fraction of his own. For that reason, Mo Tianliao didn't want to deceive his master with a fake name.

Qingtong quietly watched him and made no move to tell him to get up.

After a moment, Mo Tianliao slowly lifted his head. "Shizun, about the discipleship initiation ceremony—" Different sects had different protocols, so he certainly couldn't expect the same ceremonial rules here that he'd followed back when he'd taken that old sleazeball as his master. But he still didn't know the etiquette of Woyun Sect.

"No need for that." Qingtong shook his head. "Give me your hand and let me take a look."

Discipleship initiation naturally meant he had to let his master read his bones to determine his aptitude. But then again, his woodfire… Mo Tianliao was hesitant. A fire of a different attribute was a treasure of the universe, and such things were best kept secret before he regained his powers. However—he looked up at his stunningly beautiful master—if he hid this from even his master, he could forget about obtaining cultivation techniques that actually suited him.

Making up his mind, Mo Tianliao rolled up his sleeve and held out his right arm. He watched as Qingtong's hand extended from the wide white sleeve, so fair it was almost transparent. Two long, slender fingers slowly settled on a wrist the color of honey.

The sensation of being touched by what felt like the finest white jade, cool but with just a trace of warmth, momentarily distracted Mo Tianliao

before he realized something was off. He'd extended his right hand, so his master, who was sitting opposite him, should have used his left hand to take his pulse. Why did he use his right hand too?

Before Mo Tianliao could figure it out, those pretty fingers pulled away.

Qingtong stared at him in wordless silence for a moment, then got up and tossed a jade slip in Mo Tianliao's face. "Figure it out yourself. Don't bother me unless it's absolutely necessary." Then he left with a flick of his sleeves.

The doors to the inner chamber opened and closed with a bang, and the peerless beauty disappeared from his sight.

Mo Tianliao took the jade slip off his face and blinked.

Unlike a bamboo slip, where the text was written out plain for anyone to see, the contents of a jade slip like this could only be read by a cultivator—you had to use your divine sense to access the information. He was supposed to be a mere mortal who hadn't even learned to absorb spiritual energy, wasn't he? How did his new master expect him to figure out this jade slip on his own? *Shizun, have you forgotten something…?*

With the jade slip in hand, Mo Tianliao walked out of the grand hall and squatted at the entrance. He looked at the spiritual energy that had condensed into colorful ribbons in the sunlight, then at the jade slip, and sighed.

A tall figure blocked the sun in front of him. Mo Tianliao looked up to see a man in his thirties in a plain-colored brocade robe smiling down at him.

Mo Tianliao suddenly remembered that he could seek guidance from fellow disciples in Woyun Sect—of course he didn't need personal instruction from his master for minor stuff like learning to absorb spiritual energy. Using that as his cover, he could relax and focus on cultivating the basic techniques.

Realizing this, Mo Tianliao promptly stood up with a smile that, coupled with his young looks, gave him the appearance of an innocent youth. "Shixiong, how should I address you?"

A look of alarm came over the man's face, and he bowed. "I am Suheng, a second-generation disciple of Woqing Sanctum. Shishu, you mustn't address me as shixiong."[2]

The corners of Innocent Youth Mo Tianliao's lips twitched.

Suheng was here to look after him temporarily. As he led Mo Tianliao to his quarters, he explained the current situation of Woqing Sanctum. Apparently, he was only the second personal disciple his beautiful shizun had ever taken; all the second-generation disciples here were taught by his senior, who was currently away training. As such, Mo Tianliao was presently the second highest in seniority after the sanctum-masters. No one would dare to order him around, but no one was qualified to guide him either. Mo Tianliao felt a headache coming on.

His new home was a small courtyard in Qingning Palace, and the decorations and furnishings were all very luxurious. Once he'd dismissed the chatty Suheng, Mo Tianliao sat cross-legged on the bed and pressed the jade slip to his forehead to see what kind of cultivation technique it was.

Techniques had to match a cultivator's attributes.

In his previous life, he'd had the dual attributes of earth and fire, so he'd been well-versed in earth- and fire-element skills. Fire could strengthen earth, so he'd primarily focused on earth-based spells. Now that he possessed an innate wood attribute, which came with a woodfire that he still didn't know how to use, he could employ both wood- and fire-element spells. Wood could spark fire, so he'd have to concentrate on fire as his main offensive attribute going forward.

Metal, wood, water, fire, earth—the five elements complemented each other. If someone with dual attributes possessed two complementary ones like wood and fire, they could achieve twice the results with half the effort. With proper cultivation, they might even become more powerful than those with a single attribute. But if they had two conflicting attributes, such as water and fire, then they were terribly unlucky. They would have to learn both types of spells separately, as they couldn't be used simultaneously. Their offensive power could be even worse than those with three attributes.

Mo Tianliao knew little about wood-based techniques. This was the reason he'd had to take a master. In his current penniless state, it'd be hard for him to get his hands on a top-notch technique.

The moment the jade slip touched his forehead, his powerful divine soul perceived its contents in their entirety. It contained *The Art of Burning Wood*, which described a special technique suitable for a person with wood and fire attributes.

Delighted, Mo Tianliao mentally read the content of the first chapter. Then he opened his eyes with a peculiar expression on his face. Bafflingly, this manual only allowed him to read one chapter every day.

The Art of Burning Wood Chapter One: Fruit Tree—

Upon the southern mountain stands a tree,

which yields a fruity scent when set aflame.

Seek a deer, and burn it o’er this wood.

In other words, there was a tree with a fruity fragrance on the spiritual energy-rich, sun-facing southern mountain. He was supposed to cut down this tree, hunt a deer, ignite the wood, and grill the deer over the fire.

And that was the entire first chapter.

What in the world even was this technique?

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Shizun, are you sure this isn’t a cookbook?

Shizun: This is a cultivation novel, not a Michelin guidebook.

Woodworker: Oh… So, it’s really not a cookbook?

Shizun: *quietly bares glinting claws*

Woodworker: Ahaha, of course, this must be a top-tier technique. I’ll cultivate it right away, haha!

Chapter 6:
Pawpaw

ACCORDING TO conventional cultivation methods, beginners should start by learning how to absorb the spiritual energy of the universe into their bodies, channel it into their meridians, and convert it into their own spiritual power. Every individual had different elemental attributes, and should therefore absorb the related kinds of spiritual energy. Take Mo Tianliao, for example. He would have to absorb the spiritual energies of both the wood and fire elements. Once he could smoothly channel the spiritual energies of these elements into his body, the initial stage would be considered a success.

But this *Art of Burning Wood* mentioned nothing about absorbing spiritual energy, leaving even the worldly and knowledgeable demon lord scratching his head.

A knock at the door snapped Mo Tianliao out of his confusion.

“Shishu, the outer disciple has delivered your meal.” A tall female disciple entered with a box of food and set it down on the table without waiting for Mo Tianliao to respond.

Cultivators had to progress through the qi-refining, foundation establishment, core formation, nascent soul, and soul transformation stages before tribulation. Once they reached the core formation stage and above, they could sustain themselves on inedia pills, while those at the nascent soul stage could abstain from food entirely. Thus, the majority of the sect disciples still had to eat, and the task of cooking meals fell to the outer

disciples. These outer disciples couldn’t enter the sanctum, so the inner disciples were in charge of distributing the food.

Mo Tianliao furrowed his brows slightly as he looked up at her. The young woman, with her pretty features and graceful figure, was a rarity even in the cultivation world, but the arrogance on her face detracted somewhat from her beauty.

Suxin was a second-generation disciple with a pure fire-element attribute, just a hair’s breadth away from a heaven attribute, yet a person of her aptitude could only manage to be a second-generation disciple in Woqing Sanctum. Why on earth should someone with dual attributes, and past the age of sixteen to boot, get to be a personal disciple under the direct tutelage of Qingtong-zhenren?

“Leave it there,” Mo Tianliao said coolly, wiping the smile from his face.

Having spent centuries as a demon lord, he didn’t miss the contempt on this girl’s face. It would have been nothing out of the ordinary for the personal disciples to disdain him if he’d become a regular inner disciple at the Blessed Sanctuary of a Thousand Sprouts. But coming from a junior, it was downright disrespectful.

His obsidian eyes were as deep as icy waters as he looked at her blankly—the sight made her take an involuntary step back, and as she did, she got a clear look at him. He had an extraordinarily handsome face, with an air of dominance. Although he was still mortal, those eyes seemed to see right through her. He radiated an aura no less formidable than the sect leader’s—perhaps even more intimidating.

Embarrassed at being cowed, Suxin unleashed her own power. She was late to join the sect and had only just established her foundation, but she had already begun to consolidate her divine soul, and the power of her soul as it was now could drive mortals to their knees.

Mo Tianliao threw her a puzzled look. Other than a fleeting sense of satisfaction, what benefit could she gain from challenging him in such a crude manner?

He jumped off his bed and strolled to the dining table, completely unaffected. Suxin, on the other hand, felt as though a massive boulder was weighing down on her, making it increasingly hard for her to breathe. By the time Mo Tianliao was close, she had collapsed to her knees.

“Shizhi,[3] what are you doing ?” Mo Tianliao lifted the hem of his robe and sat down. While he had lost his cultivation, his soul was still that of a demon lord at the soul transformation stage. A mere junior cultivator at the foundation establishment stage couldn’t withstand its power.

Suxin looked terrified. “Shishu, please forgive me! I was in the wrong!”

Suddenly finding it rather pointless to squabble with a young girl, Mo Tianliao retracted his aura and waved her away. “I don’t need anyone to attend to me during meals. There’s no need to go to such extremes. You may leave.”

He’d characterized her being forced to her knees as an attempt to stay behind and serve him his meal, which infuriated Suxin so much that she almost coughed up blood. However, she didn’t dare say anything. She quickly took her leave.

Several fellow disciples pulled her aside as soon as she emerged. “So, how was it?”

“Naturally, Shishu is quite talented for Shizu[4] to have chosen him.” That was all Suxin could bring herself to say. With that, she left, her face pale.

She could never tell anyone of the terrifying power of his divine soul; otherwise, her attempt to bully him would be exposed, and she would be severely punished according to the sect’s rules.

It had been a long day, and by the time he’d finished his meal, the sky had darkened. Mo Tianliao tossed the jade slip into his inventory bracelet and lay on the bed. Closing his eyes, he drifted off to sleep.

The mountains were abundant with spiritual energy, and the entire Woqing Sanctum was his master’s domain, so there was no danger. After over three centuries, Mo Tianliao could finally sleep peacefully on a soft bed. He slept so soundly that it was late morning by the time he woke up the next day.

After breakfast, he continued to study *The Art of Burning Wood*, but he could still only read chapter one. Apparently, he would never access the second chapter if he didn’t follow the instructions. Mo Tianliao scratched his head, got properly dressed, and headed out to ask where he could find this fruit-scented tree.

The main peak was deserted. Mo Tianliao glanced at the silent Qingning Palace. He couldn’t resist taking a stroll around. The main doors to the inner chamber were still shut, though, so his master was still in seclusion.

He couldn’t help but sigh. Even if he couldn’t get answers to his questions, it’d still be nice if he could get another look at that gorgeous man. Ever since he’d laid his eyes on his master, all other attractive men and women seemed somehow lacking. Case in point, the beautiful Suxin from yesterday. In his previous life, she could have been a furnace-tender in his domain. But now, she just looked…ugly.

Dejected, Mo Tianliao went over to an earthen hill nearby, where a group of disciples in formfitting, plain-colored outfits were practicing with their swords on a platform made of celestite.

Over a dozen magical weapons glinted silver in the daylight, creating an array of intersecting sword energy with each rise and fall. Mo Tianliao stopped in his tracks. This swordplay was exquisite, likely derived from the Drop-Dead Wild Goose Stance from the *Thousand Suns Sword Manual*. However, it had been modified, and while it was a lot simpler than the original, it was much more practical. Whoever had modified this swordplay was a genius.

“Shishu!” The person at the front spotted him. It was Suheng, the one who was always cheerful.

Mo Tianliao gave him a slight nod. Suheng sheathed his sword, gestured for the others to continue, and approached Mo Tianliao to pay his respects. “Greetings, Shishu.”

“Teaching the disciples swordplay?” Mo Tianliao glanced at Suheng. When he’d probed this junior of his yesterday with his divine soul, he’d found that he was already in the middle of the core formation stage. So when he saw him practicing basic swordplay here, Mo Tianliao assumed he was teaching the disciples.

“No, we’re doing our morning practice.” Suheng wiped his sweat. Seeming to notice Mo Tianliao’s confusion, he smiled and explained, “Everyone here is a second-generation disciple who has to train here for two hours every morning, regardless of cultivation.”

Mo Tianliao was taken aback. His aptitude in his previous life had been average, but he had advanced to the soul transformation stage within three hundred years due to his solid foundation. Other than cultivating the cultivation arts daily, he had also unfailingly trained with martial arts moves to strengthen his body. This master of his was truly extraordinary.

“Is there a type of tree with a fruity scent on this mountain?” Mo Tianliao asked, remembering the reason he was here.

“Are you starting your cultivation?” Suheng’s eyes filled with envy. He’d heard that when his own master—Mo Tianliao’s fellow senior—first joined the sect, he had practiced the grandmaster’s secret technique, which started with finding a wood with a fruity aroma. “The Fruitscent Tree grows on the sun-facing slope in the back mountain. According to my shifu, it’s only about eight feet tall and the girth of a child’s arm, with bluish-black bark.”

The back mountain was protected by prohibitive barriers, and they couldn’t enter with their second-generation disciples’ jade token, so Suheng had never seen that tree.

Hearing that his senior had been given the same task, Mo Tianliao felt much more assured about the technique’s validity. He grabbed a hatchet and proceeded to the back mountain in high spirits.

Passing through the deep and quiet bamboo forest behind Qingning Palace and over a gentle slope, he could see the verdant back mountain

from a distance. Birds and animals occasionally darted by, and it didn't seem like there were any prohibitive barriers in place.

Mo Tianliao walked over unimpeded, and the scenery before him suddenly changed. The peaceful hillside with vibrant grass and wildflowers vanished abruptly, and in its place was a mountain of treasures, full of exotic flowers and lush trees.

Following what Suheng had told him, Mo Tianliao walked around the slope and soon found a grove of Fruitscent Trees. He swung his hatchet down at a withered branch.

Clang! The blade bent.

Mo Tianliao looked at the hatchet in his hand, then back at the branch that was barely any thicker than his thumb. The corner of his mouth twitched. After a brief search, he found a dark iron ore the size of a hawthorn fruit under a rock. Holding it in his palm, he commanded, "Ignite!"

Green-tinted woodfire flickered into existence, then sputtered out. It took multiple attempts, but in the end he managed to control the woodfire just enough to melt the iron ore in his hand. Then, he quickly smeared the molten iron onto the bent blade and straightened it out.

The dark iron ore wasn't a valuable material, but it was dozens of times stronger than this ordinary hatchet had been, and he easily cut down a branch in one swing.

Once he'd gathered enough firewood, Mo Tianliao went hunting for a deer. He skinned it, drained its blood, and cleaned it up by the stream. An artificer was, at heart, a craftsman who could meticulously carve even the most intricate of patterns; preparing ingredients was nothing to him.

He hung the meat and snapped his fingers, conjuring a small flame on his fingertip to set the Fruitscent wood on fire. Fresh, damp wood was usually hard to ignite, but it posed no problem for his woodfire, and the wood burst into flames. Mo Tianliao froze in place for a moment, still holding the dried leaves he'd meant to use as kindling, before hoisting the meat higher to keep it from being charred by the intense heat.

An enticing fruity aroma wafted from the wood and slowly infused the meat. Mo Tianliao glanced at the jade slip—still no chapter two. He set it aside, picked up his hatchet, and began to use it to carve the deer antler he'd cut off.

Pointy ears, tiny body, long tail—Mo Tianliao gazed at the lifelike cat sculpted out of antler in his palm, wondering whether Pawpaw had grown up.

Getting the nagging feeling that something was watching him, he looked sharply up at the tree canopy overhead and spotted a pair of crystal-clear, light-colored glass eyes staring unblinkingly at him.

Mo Tianliao forgot everything else when he saw those eyes.

A half-grown cat was sitting there quietly, its snow-white fur pure and unblemished. On its left front paw was a small ring inlaid with precious gemstones and engraved with intricate patterns. It was identical to his old bracer and could change size according to the movement of the cat's paw.

Leaping onto the branch, Mo Tianliao crouched on the tree and slowly brought his face close to the cat. The white cat stayed put and waited for him to climb up.

"Pawpaw?" Mo Tianliao murmured in disbelief, and he was promptly rewarded with a swat from His Feline Lordship.

The cat despised this name. Every time he called him by it, he'd get swatted—no exceptions.

Mo Tianliao was beside himself with delight. He scooped the cat into his arms and buried his face in its fur, nuzzling vigorously. "Pawpaw! Pawpaw! It's really you!"

"Meow!" His Feline Lordship instantly bristled with fury. *Damn it! What do you think you're doing?! How dare you nuzzle against your shizun's belly fur! This is pure sacrilege!*

Chapter 7:
Energy Absorption

HIS FELINE LORDSHIP raised his paw and clawed that nuzzling face viciously.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” Mo Tianliao howled in pain, but he couldn’t bear to lift his head from the fluffy fur, earning him another beating from those snowy-white paws.

A moment later, Mo Tianliao crouched by the fire with his hair a mess, while the white cat sat on a round rock beside him, looking the picture of elegance as he licked his paws.

The meat dripped oil into the fire, causing the flames to leap higher and sear the skin crispy. The fruity scent from the wood mingled with the mouthwatering aroma of grilled meat, making their stomachs growl.

Once he was finished grooming himself, the cat sniffed the air and called out to Mo Tianliao. “Meow!”

The soft voice completely melted the demon lord’s heart, and he couldn’t help but lean in. “Pawpaw, do you want some deer meat? Give me a kiss, and I’ll cut some for you.”

The white cat cocked his little head and looked at the scratches on Mo Tianliao’s face, but there was no blood, just a few white streaks. It looked like his new body had even thicker skin than before. So the cat took aim at that beautifully defined jaw, opened his mouth, and chomped.

“OW!” A piercing cry reverberated across the mountains, startling several birds into flight.

After being rewarded with another set of bite marks from His Feline Lordship, Mo Tianliao finally behaved himself. Obediently, he sliced the grilled meat into thin pieces, served them on some leaves he'd washed with spring water, and laid it out before the cat.

Mo Tianliao watched the fluffy little thing sniff at it disdainfully, take a tentative bite, and then nibble it up, and he couldn't help smiling as he cut a piece for himself.

The birds and animals here consumed plants imbued with spiritual energy all year round, so their flesh was rich in spiritual energy too, which made their meat much tastier than ordinary meat. All the seasoning they needed was a sprinkle of fine salt. The venison was crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. The moment it entered his mouth, his senses were flooded with a rich aroma of fruit. It wasn't sweet, exactly, but it had a delicate fragrance that cut the greasiness of the meat.

Man and cat ate with great relish. After he was finished, Mo Tianliao tried to extinguish the fire, only to discover that the stream water couldn't put out his woodfire. He set the remaining half of the deer aside and left the wood to burn out on its own.

The cat glanced at the helpless Mo Tianliao and waved his furry paw before pressing it to the ground. *Crack-crack-crack.* A thin trail of ice crystal rapidly formed on the rock beneath his paw and snaked toward the flames, instantly freezing both woodfire and firewood. The aggressive green flame promptly wilted and shrank inside the ice until it completely vanished.

Mo Tianliao, who had gone to the stream to wash his hands and fix his messy hairdo, returned to find this spectacular ice display.

“Pawpaw…” Mo Tianliao froze as a thought occurred to him. He hurriedly sat down on the grass and cradled the cat.

The white cat, clearly not wanting to be cuddled, squirmed and tried to scratch him.

“Pawpaw…” Mo Tianliao worriedly held the cat up at eye level. “Let me check something.”

It was hard for him to believe no one had ever taken note of this incredible cat, what with his exceptional aptitude. Had the little guy been captured or bullied by anyone in the years he’d been gone?

The cat raised his gleaming eyes, taking in Mo Tianliao’s worried expression, then huffed in begrudging consent.

Mo Tianliao held the cat close and pressed his forehead against that furry little head. Their divine souls connected—it seemed that Pawpaw was still a wild, untamed cat who had yet to sign a blood pact with anyone else.

“Pawpaw’s amazing!” Delighted, Mo Tianliao planted a kiss on the cat’s head.

The cat’s tail stiffened. *J-jerk! How dare you take liberties with your shizun!* Struggling, he leaped onto Mo Tianliao’s lap and glared at him. When the man couldn’t resist leaning in, he turned and showed him his tail.

Mo Tianliao chuckled and stroked His Feline Lordship’s fur to soothe him.

The great war between the gods and demons eight thousand years ago had resulted in a leakage of demonic aura from the demon realm into the Taixuan continent, tainting its spiritual energy. Cultivators who used this impure energy were prone to succumbing to their inner demons and going off the deep end. To smoothly progress with their cultivation, they had to

rely on elixirs or spiritual treasures, but the higher they cultivated, the stronger that inner turmoil would become; sometimes, even a single fight could cause their spiritual energy to run amok. In time, they discovered that there was something even more effective than elixirs—spirit beasts.

Spirit beasts were different from wild beasts. They were creatures with spiritual intelligence who were also capable of cultivation, and they were born with powerful divine souls that were clean and gentle. Signing a blood pact with a spirit beast and taming it into a soul beast could dispel a cultivator's inner demons and calm their turbulent spiritual energy. For this reason, spirit beasts without masters were always in high demand. The better their aptitudes, the more helpful they would be to the cultivator.

"Pawpaw, it's been three hundred years. Why are you still so small?" Mo Tianliao stretched out his fingers to measure the cat. The kitten that had been the size of his palm was now a mere nine inches from nose to tail—still a tiny little thing.

The cat ignored him and took his time licking his paws.

Mo Tianliao cradled the ball of fluff in his arms and stroked that sleek fur. "Did anyone bully you all these years I wasn't by your side? Whoever did, point them out to me the next time you see them. I'll beat them up for you."

Comfortable with being petted, Pawpaw stopped struggling and went limp in those warm arms, his long tail dropping in contentment, swishing in tandem with Mo Tianliao's movements. The fluffy little thing drifted off to sleep, thinking, *Hm, this fabric's too coarse to sleep in. I'll have to get this fool new clothes tomorrow…*

Mo Tianliao chuckled and nuzzled the cat's back with his cheek. He couldn't really care less about people, but he had infinite patience for fuzzy little creatures, especially this little one with a bad temper. Ever since the old sleazeball passed away, this cat had been his only companion. To Mo Tianliao, Pawpaw wasn't a possession; he was his dearest kin.

Carrying the blissed-out cat, Mo Tianliao took out the jade slip. As he expected, the second chapter had appeared after he'd grilled the deer.

The Art of Burning Wood Chapter Two: Energy Absorption—In a secluded place, absorb the spiritual energy of the universe into your meridians.

Channel first the wood, then the fire; wood through the limbs, fire to the dantian.

That's all? Mo Tianliao looked it over repeatedly, but that was really all there was to it.

Ordinary manuals came with a lengthy introduction on channeling spiritual energy, the mantras and mental techniques involved, and even an explanation of what energy absorption or spiritual energy was. This *Art of Burning Wood* didn't look like it was meant for beginners, but for accomplished cultivators starting anew…

At this thought, Mo Tianliao gave a start and looked down at the jade slip in his hands, remembering that it was inscribed with a divine soul, so naturally, it required a divine soul to be read. Cultivators without divine souls wouldn't be able to read it at all; mortals who were just starting out had to read books instead.

"Shizun…" Mo Tianliao took a deep breath. It seemed Qingtong-zhenren had known from the start that he was a previously skilled cultivator

reborn in a new body, so he hadn't bothered playing games and had simply thrown the jade slip at his face.

"Mew?" the little cat answered sleepily at the sound of Mo Tianliao's voice.

Mo Tianliao patted the furry creature in his arms, feeling a little worried. If his master had seen through him, what about the sect leader? Typically, no one—no matter how powerful a cultivator they were—could tell if someone had been reborn through possession of another's body as long as the person in question didn't expose themselves. At least, unless there were some secret methods he wasn't aware of.

Even though Qingtong-zhenren knew, though, he hadn't struck his new disciple dead—he had even given him a suitable technique to cultivate. He clearly bore him no malice. Mo Tianliao decided he should eventually confess to his master to get a better read on the situation.

Mo Tianliao was in a good mood now that he'd found his cat. As for everything else, well, where there was a will, there was a way. Nothing to worry about.

Cradling the cat, Mo Tianliao wrapped the remaining half of the deer in large leaves and stomped out the ice shards that Pawpaw had created to ensure that the woodfire was fully extinguished. Then he headed back down the mountains.

When he returned to Qingning Palace, he saw a crowd gathered at the entrance to his courtyard.

"Greetings, Shishu!" Seeing Mo Tianliao, the crowd bowed to him—whether this was a sincere greeting or just for show, at least they looked respectful on the surface.

Mo Tianliao nodded. “What brings you here?”

The group looked at each other before pushing Suheng—the one most familiar with Mo Tianliao—forward. Suheng looked embarrassed, but he steeled himself and answered, “To reply to Shishu, our shifu has been traveling for over three months now, and there is no one to attend to the routine affairs of our realm. We are at a loss for what to do. Now that you are here, it’s only right for us to hand these matters over to you.”

The so-called routine affairs referred to the sect’s non-cultivation matters. While everyone was here to cultivate, daily necessities like food, clothing, expenses, and social relations couldn’t be overlooked. Mo Tianliao’s demon palace used to have a dedicated steward to handle all these, although he often had to deal with some tasks himself.

However, he had no cultivation now, and asking him to take charge of Woqing Sanctum was really… Mo Tianliao surveyed the crowd. Their expressions varied, but it was clear many of them were just there to watch the show. Understanding dawned on him.

When all was said and done, these so-called “prides of heaven” still couldn’t accept a dual-attribute person becoming the personal disciple of a sanctum-master. They wanted to find out what this mortal was capable of… and also to offload the tedious tasks holding them back from their own cultivation. Two birds, one stone.

“Put them in my quarters; I’ll look them over. All disciples-in-charge, come here after morning practice tomorrow to receive instructions.” Mo Tianliao handed the rest of the deer to Suheng. “Today’s hunt from the back mountain. You can share it among yourselves.”

Without waiting for their response, he entered his quarters.

The crowd traded glances, then carried the account books and seal in after him. Suheng waited outside with the meat in hand until Mo Tianliao waved them away.

Looking at the mountain of accounts on his table, Mo Tianliao scoffed. Had they brought him all the accounts from a hundred years ago until the modern day? Leaving those aside for now, he took out a spiritual stone from his inventory bracelet and embedded it in a notch at the corner of the courtyard. A faint barrier of light instantly enveloped the entire courtyard.

This was a built-in protective barrier that could be activated with a spiritual stone. He was going to try absorbing spiritual energy into his body tonight, and no way would he let anyone disturb him.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Shizun, you knew I'd been reborn through possession?

Shizun: Duh, what a dumb disciple.

Woodworker: What do you hope to achieve by threatening me with this?

Shizun: What do you think? Duh.

Woodworker: *lies down* Come on, then. I won't resist!

Shizun: *raises paw, sends him flying with a swat*

Chapter 8:
Good Night's Sleep

DRAWING SPIRITUAL ENERGY into one's body was easiest around midnight, when the spiritual energy was at its most placid. For now, after he'd set up the protective barrier, Mo Tianliao took a seat at the table and began reviewing the account books.

The cat inside his robes woke and poked his snow-white head out of his collar. He cast a lazy glance at the papers on the table and yawned.

Mo Tianliao craned his neck down, trying to kiss him, but his collar opening was too low, so he gave up. "Awake now, Pawpaw? Are you hungry?"

The cat bounded up from his collar to his shoulder and peered down at the account book in his hand.

Mo Tianliao nuzzled the cat with his ear. "The Woqing Sanctum's routine affairs are a mess."

The cat scratched his ear with his hind paw. *What mess? I don't see anything wrong with them?*

Not expecting an answer from the little furball, Mo Tianliao started scanning through the account book. These second-generation disciples thought that bringing him all these books would overwhelm him, but to Mo Tianliao, who possessed a divine soul at the soul transformation stage, it was a piece of cake. After all, with a soul at that level, one could read countless books a day and still remember every word.

Less than two hours later, Mo Tianliao had gone through all the account books on the table.

Overall, it wasn't too messy. At least it was clear who was supposed to do what. However, the allocation wasn't optimal, with many unclear processes and loopholes.

Take, for example, the monthly allocation of resources for Woqing Sanctum. Every month, the sect leader's Chamber of Administrative Affairs would deliver those resources over to the sanctum-masters, and the various chief disciples would then distribute them to the individual disciples. This process left plenty of room for someone to engage in funny business; there was no guarantee of fairness for all.

Mo Tianliao closed the books, having already thought of a plan. It was getting late. He stretched. "Pawpaw, let's sleep."

He carried the cat to bed, intending to take a nap to recharge before it was time to cultivate at midnight.

"Meow!" The fluffy little white creature struggled free from Mo Tianliao's arms and jumped off the bed. He clearly had no intention of napping with him.

Mo Tianliao propped his head up on one hand and looked at the cat sitting on the floor. "Go play by yourself if you don't want to sleep. And don't go around eating random food."

The cat couldn't escape the courtyard with the barrier in place, so Mo Tianliao fell asleep without worrying about it.

The white cat leaped onto the windowsill, glanced back at the sleeping Mo Tianliao, twitched his ear, and jumped out, effortlessly passing through the courtyard's barrier.

He made his way through the night to Qingning Palace, which was lit up with lamps made of colored glaze. Light shone through the crystal walls, making the whole place breathtakingly beautiful.

The white cat sprang onto the jade steps and transformed into a tall, slender man in a flash of white light. Dressed in white robes, he seemed to emanate a subtle glow as he ascended.

The palace doors opened before he reached them, and the brightly lit interior illuminated his impossibly handsome face—the face of none other than the master of this palace, Qingtong.

“Sanctum-master.” Several attendants in white dresses stepped forward and bowed as he entered the inner chamber. One of them carried his robes, another held a teacup, and yet another had a jade comb in hand.

Qingtong-zhenren lifted his arms, allowing the attendants to take off his sheer outer robe and change him into softer garments. Then they removed his exquisite jade crown and smoothed his hair with the comb, running it all the way to the ends of those silky, ink-black strands.

He waved them away with a fair, almost translucent hand. The attendants disappeared just as quickly as they had appeared.

Qingtong raised his left hand, and his smooth, wide sleeve slid down, revealing a bracelet three fingers wide clasped tightly around his delicate forearm. Dark blue gemstones sparkled brilliantly against the intricate, luxurious silver casing, so ornately beautiful that female cultivators would have willingly paid tens of thousands of spiritual stones for it if they’d laid their eyes on it.

Mo Tianliao always prioritized functionality over aesthetic for his creations; most of the time, they turned out ugly. Only the items he made

for his cat were this meticulously and exquisitely crafted. Everyone said Lord Duantian had superb skills but poor taste. Little did they know he was the finest artisan of all—those people just weren't worth his efforts.

Qingtong lowered his hand, letting his sleeve fall to cover the beautiful sight within. He walked through the layers of sheer curtains in the inner chamber toward his bedchamber.

The spacious bedchamber was dark, although it didn't affect Qingtong's vision as he strolled over to the large, soft bed and sank into its embrace. He'd finally found his human; he could now sleep in peace.

The moon ascended high in the sky. Midnight finally arrived.

Mo Tianliao opened his eyes and estimated the time, thinking he ought to craft an artifact for timekeeping when he had some free time; it was really tiresome to be constantly guessing.

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, he took out the few spiritual stones he had left in his inventory bracelet and placed them beside him. This place was abundant with spiritual energy, so logically, there should be enough for his use. However, accidents could happen, and one could never be too prepared. If he failed, he would damage his meridians, and he would need a month's rest before he could make another attempt. He'd need to succeed on the first try.

He positioned his left hand above, with the middle finger pressing against his right palm, while the middle finger of his right hand was positioned below, pressed against the base of his left middle finger. Both hands formed the shape of an unopened lotus bud, ensuring they'd be connected once the spiritual energy entered his body and that the flow of the exchange wouldn't happen too fast.

He closed his eyes, but his vision didn’t go dark. His powerful divine soul allowed him to clearly perceive the spiritual energy flowing around him in five swirling hues of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue.

The way of Heaven takes from what is in excess to make whole what is in dearth, whilst the way of Man takes from those in want to offer to those who lack for naught.[5] Follow the course of nature, for that is the way of the Dao; align with Heaven’s will, know your destiny, and use what is in surfeit in the universe to remedy your own deficits.

Mo Tianliao’s new body wasn’t an ordinary human body, so he couldn’t directly absorb spiritual energy. He had to follow the *Art of Burning Wood’s* instructions to first absorb wood-based spiritual energy into his body, then channel the fire-element spiritual energy into his dantian**.**

Imagine myself as the undying tree that stands between heaven and earth, and all the spiritual energies of the wood shall be mine to command.

Countless wisps of green spiritual energy swirled tentatively around him before gushing into him from all directions, like trickling rivulets streaming into a mountain creek.

The wood-based spiritual energy was full of vitality as it circulated through his limbs and bones. Mo Tianliao felt like a sapling absorbing water. His limbs slowly stretched under the abundance of spiritual energy, and his joints popped. He carefully controlled the circulation as it flowed between his hands, and the spiritual energy coursed through his body in streams as wide across as a man’s finger, speeding until it peaked. He instantly put his palms together.

As countless rivers to the vast ocean flow, so do spiritual energies in all creation go.

His eyes snapped open, glowing green. He'd succeeded.

He gradually concluded his mediation, looking delighted. No matter how good someone's aptitude was, some degree of obstruction was inevitable in the process of absorbing energy. Even heaven-attribute cultivators with broad meridians would be hindered by the limitation of their physical flesh. But with the body of the divine tree, Mo Tianliao could absorb spiritual energy into his flesh and blood.

If one imagined that a person with a single attribute was sucking in spiritual energy through a thin bamboo straw, and a person with a heaven attribute absorbed the same energy through a bamboo pipe, Mo Tianliao was essentially siphoning it in through a huge bamboo tube.

Now that he'd succeeded in absorbing wood-based spiritual energy, Mo Tianliao breathed a sigh of relief and proceeded to draw in fire-element spiritual energy.

The average person with dual attributes had to absorb both spiritual energies at the same time and prevent the two from colliding. But Mo Tianliao wasn't a true dual-attribute cultivator, so he could absorb them separately.

With his divine soul, he looked internally into his body. The woodfire in his dantian was only a firefly's glow, flickering weakly.

He separated his hands into an upper and lower protective position around his dantian and drew over the red spiritual energy. Before he could recite the incantation, the woodfire leaped and whirled in excitement, creating a small spiritual vortex in his core that promptly drew in the fire-element spiritual energy.

“Ugh…” Mo Tianliao grunted. It felt as though tiny flames were converging from all over his body toward his dantian, burning his meridians along the way. For a moment he felt searing pain, but then his meridians adapted to the heat, leaving him feeling comfortable. It was like soaking his feet in hot water—scalding at first, but pleasant once he got used to it.

When his dantian could no longer hold more spiritual energy, Mo Tianliao cut off the absorption and slowly expelled a breath of turbid energy. The woodfire in his dantian had grown larger, and it rested lazily without moving, apparently sated.

Mo Tianliao flopped back onto the bed, too exhausted to move. Earlier, he’d discovered that his woodfire wasn’t limited to the tiny one in his core; it was spread throughout his body, but he could currently only use the fire in his dantian. He’d need to keep cultivating to draw these scattered flames into his dantian.

Having successfully absorbed these spiritual energies, Mo Tianliao had a good night’s sleep.

Meanwhile, the gorgeous man in Qingning Palace turned over on his soft bed and slowly opened his enchanting eyes.

Moonlight streamed in through the window, casting fan-shaped shadows of his long eyelashes on his face. His thin, pink lips pinched softly together. “Damn it.”

He sat up, got off the bed, opened the window, and gazed out at the little courtyard at the side of the palace. Seeing that spiritual energies had stopped converging there, Qingtong placed a hand on the windowsill for support, then gracefully leaped out and transformed into a white cat, sneaking away into the night.

The man on the bed was asleep when the white cat jumped onto his bed and nudged him disdainfully.

“Mm…” Mo Tianliao hummed and loosened his arms slightly.

The fluffy little cat burrowed into the crook of Mo Tianliao’s arms, but it wasn’t as comfortable as he preferred. He pawed Mo Tianliao’s collar apart to reveal the soft inner garment underneath. Satisfied, he settled in.

“Pawpaw…” Sensing something furry snuggling up to him in his sleep, Mo Tianliao smiled and hugged the furball in his arms tighter.

“Dummy.” The cat pouted, nuzzled his head against Mo Tianliao’s stubbled chin, and closed his eyes in contentment.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Pray tell, what’s up with Shizun sneaking into his disciple’s bed in the middle of the night?

Shizun: I’m here to check on your cultivation progress.

Woodworker: Too much effort. Why don’t I just cultivate in your chamber? *doe-eyed*

Shizun: *raises paw, sends him flying with a swat*

Chapter 9:
Affair Management

THE MORNING SUNLIGHT streamed through the open window and shone upon the wooden bed.

Mo Tianliao's brow furrowed, and he slowly opened his eyes. Feeling something warm on his chest, he looked down and saw a snowy little ball of fluff nestling on his chest, sleeping soundly. His paws were outstretched, and one was hooked around a lock of Mo Tianliao's hair.

The warm, amber sunlight shining onto the white fur made it glow, a sight so inviting Mo Tianliao couldn't help but lean in to plant kisses on that furry head.

"Mew," the cat murmured, blocking Mo Tianliao's misbehaving lips with a paw. Yawning, he opened his eyes to the sight of a silly, grinning face.

Dummy! He raised a paw and swatted him on the cheek.

"Pawpaw…!" Mo Tianliao chuckled, and his grin got even wider. Life couldn't get much better than waking up to this little fluffball in his arms.

He'd thought it would be years before he'd be able to find his cat. He had even mentally prepared himself for the possibility that the cat had already been forced into signing a blood pact with someone else; whoever it was, he'd have been ready to exterminate them to take his cat back. But nothing like that had happened.

The two of them lounged on the bed for a while before Mo Tianliao got up and slowly began to get ready. He'd absorbed spiritual energies a little too quickly last night, draining the spiritual stones on his bed of their energy and turning them gray.

Mo Tianliao tidied his bed while the cat sat on the pillow, eyeing those depleted stones. He raised his paw to bat at them, and the stones, no longer held together by spiritual energy, instantly crumbled to dust. What was once a slightly messy bed had become a dumpsite.

Mo Tianliao looked in resignation at the unsightly bed and picked the cat up in his arms. "Forget it. Let's bathe first." He had worked up quite a sweat last night and still felt sticky.

Although this courtyard was technically part of Qingning Palace, it was in a completely different style from the magnificent palace. Simple and rustic, it seemed more like a home in the countryside. It had all the essentials, though: a bedroom, a bathroom, and a small kitchen.

There was a tub in the bathroom, but no hot water. Mo Tianliao filled it with fresh water from the well in the courtyard, then consolidated the woodfire in his palm and stirred it into the icy water, which promptly started steaming.

"Stay here and don't get wet. I'll bathe you later." Mo Tianliao set the cat on the high stool by the tub where the perfumes were kept. Then he turned around, undressed, and stepped into the tub.

The fluffy little cat looked staidly down at his paws. *H-how dare he behave like this before his master… Shameless!*

Mo Tianliao didn't notice the cat's unusual behavior and continued to happily wash himself. Absorbing spiritual energies into the body could

purge any impurities within. The first time he'd absorbed spiritual energy in his previous life, he'd flushed out a whole body's worth of black sludge, but there wasn't even a single speck of muck this time. As a former tree, his body was free of filth. This was also why His Feline Lordship could comfortably snuggle in his arms all night.

"Pawpaw, how's your cultivation progress? Have you reached the peak of the second level?"

The spiritual power of spirit beasts could advance through levels too, corresponding with the five stages that human cultivators went through. Some spirit beasts with exceptional aptitude could take on human form when they reached level three, or the core formation stage.

Spirit beasts were rare, and Pawpaw was the only one Mo Tianliao had ever raised. He didn't know the speed at which they cultivated.

"What would you look like if you evolved into human form?" Mo Tianliao leaned against the edge of the tub and gazed at the little cat. "You wouldn't end up as a little kid, would you?"

The cat stared back at him, refusing to dignify his words with a response. Standing up on his hind legs at the tub's edge, he reached out to fish for Mo Tianliao's hair in the warm water, but his paw got wet, and he quickly shook it dry, splashing droplets all over Mo Tianliao's face.

Having spiritual energy made life a lot more convenient for Mo Tianliao. At the very least, his mastery of fire-element spiritual energy had reached perfection. After he was done bathing, he circulated his fire-element spiritual power through his body to thoroughly dry himself all over, even his long hair. Once dressed, he prepared a small basin of water and set

it in the middle of the courtyard where sunlight could reach it. Then, he carried the cat out.

“Pawpaw, let me give you a bath,” Mo Tianliao said to the cat, pointing at the basin as he warmed the water.

The white cat looked at the simple basin, then at the gently smiling Mo Tianliao, and swished his tail. *Well, considering you haven’t bathed me for such a long time, I shall grudgingly allow you to serve me today.*

Having received His Feline Lordship’s consent, Mo Tianliao squatted down happily, lowered the cat into the water, and began washing his fur with practiced ease.

The cat was already quite clean, so Mo Tianliao only had to give him a quick bath. Then he wrapped the cat in a towel, channeled fire into his palms, and quickly dried the little guy from head to tail, making him warm and fluffy. But as soon as he tried to touch his belly, the cat resisted and struggled to get away.

“Stop fooling around. Let me dry your fur.” Mo Tianliao caught the escaping cat and reached out to touch him again, only to get a scratch for his trouble.

“Meow!” *Insolent disciple, where do you think you’re touching?!* The cat leaped onto the peach tree in the courtyard and hissed at him. Before Mo Tianliao could speak, he turned and fled without looking back.

“Huh, he got mad again.” Mo Tianliao scratched his head. He hadn’t seen this little one for centuries, and his temper had gotten even worse.

Mo Tianliao tidied up the place, changed the bedsheets, and made himself presentable. Just then, the second-generation disciples who had finished their morning practice arrived.

Mo Tianliao made them all wait and watch as he took his time eating his breakfast in front of them, before at last he took out a register of names.

“Step forward when your name is called and tell me your daily duties,” he said, flipping open the register with long, slender fingers. With a deep, melodious voice, he called out the names one at a time. Whenever he came to a disciple-in-charge, he had them put their jade token on the table as proof.

Everyone was surprised to discover that this elder of theirs had already reached the first level of the qi-refining stage overnight. After they’d all stated their duties, they reported on recent matters.

“Shishu, it’s the birthday of Yanlie-shibo of Wotian Sanctum the day after tomorrow,” said Suli, the disciple in charge of rites and ceremonies. “Woqing Sanctum should prepare a gift.”

Mo Tianliao glanced up at him. “You mean, prepare a birthday gift for Yanlie-shixiong in Woqing Sanctum’s name?” His voice was flat, masking his feelings on the issue.

Suli didn’t catch the implication; he thought Mo Tianliao was just verifying his words, so without thinking, he answered, “That’s right.”

“Hmph!” Mo Tianliao snorted. “Yanlie is a first-generation disciple, and his master is still alive. What sense does it make to send him a gift in the name of this entire sanctum?”

Suli faltered, taken aback. He’d meant to sabotage this new elder, but instead of falling for his trap, Mo Tianliao had turned the tables on him. “I mean, prepare a gift in your name,” he corrected himself quickly.

Mo Tianliao didn’t reply. He just looked back at him inscrutably. A heavy silence filled the room. In spite of his own strapping build, Suli felt a

chill run down his spine under that gaze. He broke out in a cold sweat.

Just as he was about to crack, Mo Tianliao spoke. “Is this how you usually handle affairs?”

“Uh…” Suli hesitated, at a loss for how to answer.

“Does anyone here know how this should be handled?” Mo Tianliao ignored Suli and scanned the group of disciples.

“Me!” A pretty female disciple raised her hand. “Yanlie-shibo is celebrating his birthday this year because he succeeded in advancing to the nascent soul stage. The sect leader wants to reward him, hence the grand celebration. As juniors, we are not qualified to send him gifts. However, you can send him a decent gift in your and Shizu’s name, then remind Shizu to give him a reward in his capacity as an elder.”

One of her fellow disciples discreetly tugged at her sleeve, but the girl ignored her. Why should they make things difficult for such a handsome and capable shishu?

“Excellent.” Mo Tianliao nodded. “What’s your name?” She hadn’t been one of the disciples-in-charge he’d called on earlier.

“My name is Suwen,” she replied in a clear, crisp voice.

“From today onward, you’ll be the disciple in charge of rites and ceremonies at Woqing Sanctum.” Mo Tianliao handed her the relevant jade token.

Her eyes widened. After a moment of stunned silence, she joyfully accepted it with both hands. “Thank you, Shishu. I’ll do my best!”

Suwen, who came from a noble family, had long disapproved of the petty, small-minded way Suli handled things. She considered him a disgrace

to Woqing Sanctum.

Suli's face turned ghastly pale. Managing rites and ceremonies was a lucrative post. If he lost it, he'd only have his monthly allocation of resources to count on for his future cultivation needs. "Shishu, Shifu was the one who appointed me to this post."

Mo Tianliao looked at him with the ghost of a smile. "Then go cry to your shifu about it when he returns."

Several disciples who didn't get along with Suli burst out laughing.

Now that they'd seen Suli's fate, the other disciples-in-charge behaved themselves and dutifully made their reports. Mo Tianliao swiftly handled all the affairs and made some slight changes to the distribution of tasks.

He followed his own principles from his previous life when making arrangements for the assignments: Whoever would be good at a task would be the one to do it. It didn't matter if you were drop-dead gorgeous, you could still be assigned to shoveling manure.

The second-generation disciples were all as docile as quails after Mo Tianliao put those errant disciples in their places. Finally satisfied, Mo Tianliao dismissed them all with a wave of his hand.

After leaving the courtyard, a few of the female disciples chattered among themselves. "Shishu was so imposing when he dealt with Suli earlier!"

"Yeah! Did you see he'd progressed in his cultivation in just one night? His potential is limitless. Told you Shizu couldn't be wrong."

"And what about his looks! Our shishu is the most handsome of his generation, right?!"

“When he glanced at me with those eyes—I could hardly breathe!”

Hearing the girls’ discussions, the male disciples traded looks. Classic woman logic—the most handsome one was always right.

After sending away the noisy juniors, Mo Tianliao straightened his clothes and made his way to the main hall of Qingning Palace.

The hall was filled with attendants in white. It was nothing like the deserted atmosphere of the previous day. When they saw Mo Tianliao, the attendants quietly curtsied in unison, and one stepped forward. “Zhenren is awake. Would you like me to inform him of your arrival?”

Mo Tianliao nodded. “Please do. Just say Mo Tianliao wishes to seek an audience.”

The attendant curtsied again and hurried off.

After waiting a moment, he heard the tinkling of bells, like clear echoes from an ancient desert. The doors to the inner chamber slowly opened, and his master, dressed in white, strode toward him. Sunlight filtered through the dark crystals, and its reflection in those cold eyes sparkled like a cascade of stars across the firmament.

Mo Tianliao unconsciously softened his breathing and diligently walked over to his master, offering his hand to help him to his seat. Qingtong glanced at the long, slender arm before him and gave him his right hand.

The cool sensation of his master’s jade-like hand sent a slight flutter through Mo Tianliao’s heart. Shouldn’t a master have white hair, a ruddy complexion, and a long, flowing beard? It was far too easy to succumb to temptation when your master looked like that!

MINI EXTRA

Shishu Is Too Fierce. Shifu, Save Me!

Disciple A: Shifu, save me!

Disciple B: Shifu, I want your verdict!

Disciple C: Shifu, I don’t want to clean manure!

Eldest Shixiong: Huh?

Woodworker: They miss you.

Eldest Shixiong: Oh, I see. Well done, Shidi!

All disciples: QAQ

Chapter 10:
Outfits

AS SOON AS QINGTONG reached out to Mo Tianliao, he realized he'd made a dumb mistake. He'd been so used to playing the pat-a-paw game with this guy that the moment Mo Tianliao gave him his hand, he felt compelled to respond. With his brow furrowing slightly, he withdrew his hand.

Feeling that satiny hand leave his palm, Mo Tianliao felt a pang of regret, but when his master shot him a cool gaze as he settled down on the plush couch, he promptly snapped out of his inappropriate thoughts and went over.

"What's the matter?" Qingtong accepted the glass cup an attendant handed him and took a sip of his tea.

Mo Tianliao tore his eyes away from his master's thin, pale lips. "I have some important matters to report," he said, lowering his gaze.

Qingtong set down the teacup and waved his hand; the attendants promptly took their leave.

Mo Tianliao kneeled on the cushion by the couch and kowtowed. "Shizun is wise indeed to have recognized that I was a man reborn. Please pardon me for not informing you earlier."

Qingtong looked down at the back of Mo Tianliao's lowered head, tilting his own in confusion before realizing what this guy was actually saying. Not replying, he straightened his posture again before Mo Tianliao looked up quietly at him with those clear, beautiful eyes of his.

Mo Tianliao was impressed to see his master so unruffled by this revelation. Unlike the pretentious elders of those so-called prestigious sects, his master truly radiated a naturally distinguished, ethereal aura that emanated from his very soul. “I’m not able to tell you my previous identity,” he said, “but please rest assured that I’ll never do anything to endanger you or Woyun Sect.”

Qingtong hummed in acknowledgment, his voice neutral. “All right. You can get up now.”

Mo Tianliao heaved a sigh of relief and sat on the cushion. Now that he’d laid all his cards on the table, he could openly discuss his cultivation with his master.

Honestly, Mo Tianliao needed little guidance when it came to cultivation. He knew exactly how to cultivate at each stage to achieve the most optimal results. His current body was special, though; he was still figuring things out, so he needed someone to discuss it with.

When he heard about Mo Tianliao’s confusion on the subject of burning wood, Qingtong gave him a tip: “All creations in the world have a spirit, including celestial trees. Give it a try.”

Mo Tianliao didn’t think he’d ever get tired of listening to this clear and melodious voice. Although he didn’t fully get the underlying meaning, he nodded and made a mental note of those words.

“One more thing.” Mo Tianliao rarely got to see his master, so he seized his chance to report everything. “Shizun has been in seclusion for quite a while, so the juniors have entrusted me with handling the sanctum’s affairs…” He looked back up at his master. Seeing no reaction, Mo Tianliao interpreted that as tacit approval of his new role, so he continued speaking.

Woqing Sanctum's affairs were managed and strictly controlled by a few disciples-in-charge, which made both fairness and efficiency hard to achieve. Using the main sect's approach as a point of reference, Mo Tianliao had established a Chamber of Administrative Affairs to distribute resources and assign tasks, ensuring transparency in all stages of the processes.

Of course, he had his own selfish interest in doing all of this. While he was cultivating yesterday, he'd realized he needed an obscene amount of spiritual energy, and solely relying on natural sources wasn't enough: He needed a *huge* supply of spiritual stones. He also had plans to forge artifacts in the future, and that was a money-burning endeavor that would require even more resources. By establishing a Chamber of Administrative Affairs, he could consolidate power in his own hands and make things easier for himself in the future.

Qingtong looked at him calmly. "No need to say so much. Just do whatever you please." Then he stood up and walked away with a flick of his sleeves.

"Wait! Shizun!" Mo Tianliao caught up with him. "One last thing. The day after tomorrow is Yanlie-shixiong's birthday. The sect leader is planning to host a grand celebration this year. As his elder, you'll need to prepare a gift."

"Just give this to him on my behalf." With a flip of his hand, Qingtong produced an exquisitely wrought bell and handed it to Mo Tianliao.

On his way home, Mo Tianliao examined the fist-sized bell. It was made of exquisite ore, and there was a glass bead in the middle that made a

musical tinkling sound when it was shaken. But no matter how gorgeous it was, it was just a bell! Yup. This was no magical artifact. Just an ordinary bell!

A big, pretty bell—that was the gift a patriarch at the soul transformation stage bestowed upon a junior at the nascent soul stage.

Mo Tianliao found the gift rather scalding in his hands.

Perhaps there was some underlying meaning? As he was new to the sect, he didn't understand the special intricacies of the place. Scratching his head, he put the bell away and took an axe with him to the back mountain.

Chapter three of *The Art of Burning Wood* had appeared when he'd succeeded in absorbing energy. It described three peculiar trees he'd have to cut down and set ablaze, and how he'd have to hunt and grill several pheasants over that fire.

He hacked down at a tree, creating a gash in the wood. Through narrowed eyes, he could dimly see a wisp of green light escaping from the opening.

All creations in the world have a spirit, including celestial trees…

Perhaps what his master meant wasn't spiritual intelligence, but spiritual energy.

He looked up at the tree. It was a thousand-year-old Sinking Agarwood that was extremely heavy and would sink in water. It was excellent material for crafting flying darts or the like. Even a hundred-year-old tree could fetch a good price, and this specimen was over a thousand.

Spiritual stones had spiritual energies contained within, so this valuable refining material naturally had it as well. However, the spiritual

energy in spiritual stones had no elemental alignment, and plants only had wood-element spiritual energy that humans couldn’t absorb.

Mo Tianliao frowned. Perhaps humans couldn’t use this energy, but he wasn’t purely human now. And since he could see the green light, then perhaps… He swung the axe down again, and more green light escaped. Mo Tianliao instantly activated his spiritual power. The spiritual energy of the thousand-year-old tree slid along his fingers like a tiny green snake and entered his body.

Celestial trees contained spiritual energies humans couldn’t use, but that wasn’t a problem for a man with a divine tree body.

From the looks of it, he could skip meditation and just cultivate by chopping trees. He didn’t even need to bother separating the five-colored spiritual energies, because whatever wafted out was sure to be the wood element.

And so, Mo Tianliao spent the whole day tirelessly and happily chopping trees like he was on a treasure hunt.

When he was finally done with chopping wood and splitting it into firewood, he noticed the white cat sleeping soundly on a rock. The glow of the setting sun bathed its fluffy white fur in amber.

Mo Tianliao walked over, dusted off the sawdust from his hands, and picked up the cat—once the sun set, that rock was going to get cold.

Surprisingly enough, the usually alert cat didn’t wake up when he cradled it. Mo Tianliao chuckled despite himself. Carefully, he tucked the cat into the usual spot against his chest, squatted down to start a fire, and began to carve a few wooden spikes with his axe, each about nine inches long.

A great master wasn’t limited by his tools. In Mo Tianliao’s hand, the cumbersome axe became a delicate carving knife, and in no time at all, he’d carved out a set of smooth spikes. He fiddled with one, twirling the gleaming wooden spike around his slender, dexterous fingers.

Nearby, some brightly colored pheasants pecked around for food, clucking softly. Mo Tianliao focused his spiritual energy at his fingertips and flung the spike, nailing a passing pheasant’s spread wing to a tree trunk.

“We have meat to eat now, Pawpaw.” Mo Tianliao looked down at the little fluffball, who’d just woken up and was poking his head out of his collar for a look, and took him along to collect the pheasant.

The Art of Burning Wood seemed to always have some kind of weird grilling request, and so the limited space inside Mo Tianliao’s inventory bangle was now fully stocked with various seasonings and even clothing. As he skewered the pheasant drumsticks on long sticks pared down from the wood, Mo Tianliao sighed. The wood wasn’t exceptionally precious, but it was still rare. It was a shame there was no more room in his inventory. He really needed to craft a new inventory device first thing after the feast tomorrow.

Man and cat gobbled up the grilled pheasant before strolling back to the courtyard.

Suwen, who had been waiting there for a long time, promptly went up to Mo Tianliao and presented a tray. “Shishu, these are the gifts I’ve prepared. Do we need to add anything else?”

Mo Tianliao was attending the feast tomorrow, so naturally, he needed to bring gifts from Woqing Sanctum. Being new to the sect, though, he barely knew Yanlie, so he didn’t need to give him anything too valuable.

A certain quantity of spiritual stones and spiritual herbs would suffice, and that could all come from the public repository.

Not finding anything missing, Mo Tianliao nodded. “Hold on to these for now. You can accompany me tomorrow.”

Suwen’s eyes lit up in delight. “Yes, Shishu!”

After he’d dismissed Suwen, the attendants in white from Qingning Palace arrived.

“What brings you all here, Jiejie?” Mo Tianliao welcomed them inside with a smile. These girls weren’t disciples of Woqing Sanctum, and they didn’t have particularly high cultivation either—they were just attendants who waited on the sanctum-master.

The cat in his shirt tried to peer out, but Mo Tianliao pressed his head down. Spirit beasts were exceedingly precious, and at its current level Mo Tianliao’s cultivation was too meager to protect him, so he couldn’t let anyone see him.

The unhappy fluffball scratched him through his inner garment. *Those attendants aren’t even a hundred years old, and this guy has the nerve to call them jiejie? He really has no shame!*

“We’re here on the sanctum-masters’ order to deliver some outfits.” They set several trays which held three sets of fine, black wide-sleeved robes on the table.

“Black?” Mo Tianliao picked one up and frowned. Everyone in Woqing Sanctum wore white. Why were they giving him black, which was the same color as Xuanji-zhenren’s robes?

“Woyun Sect isn’t particular about your attire, so you don’t need to worry about it,” one of the attendants explained. They all curtsied and left.

Mo Tianliao thought about it. The first-generation disciples he'd seen at Woyun's grand hall had indeed worn whatever they pleased, in all the colors of the rainbow. Perhaps the second-generation disciples of Woqing Sanctum wore white to please his master?

The next day, Mo Tianliao dressed up in a black wide-sleeved robe topped with a sheer outer robe embroidered with silver cloud patterns. An obsidian dragon crown inlaid with silver completed the look, giving him the appearance of a distinguished gentleman. He hadn't been that striking in ordinary cotton clothes, but now, dressed in this finery, his exceptionally handsome face really stood out.

The little cat sitting on the bed glanced up at Mo Tianliao to find he'd finally become a little more pleasing to the eye. He sprang onto Mo Tianliao's shoulder and swished his tail. *Let's go!*

Mo Tianliao put the cat back down on the bed. "Be good. Play by yourself here. I'll be back this afternoon." The feast would be crowded, and he couldn't let anyone catch sight of Pawpaw.

Displeased, the cat clawed at the bedsheet.

Mo Tianliao walked out to the courtyard and found Suwen waiting there, telling her, "Let's go."

Suwen's eyes widened and she gaped at the stunningly handsome elder before her. She only closed her mouth and got it together to stumble after him when he called out to her.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Shixiooong, this is a gift from my shizun.

Yanlie: *speechless*

Disciple A: It must be a spiritual treasure that bewitches whoever hears it ring.

Disciple B: It must be a key to a secret dungeon you open by ringing it.

Sect Leader: What a pretty bell! Come, dear disciple, wear it around your neck!

Yanlie: *speechless*

Chapter 11:
Gift

THEY CROSSED the arched bridge and arrived at Wotian Sanctum. The realm within was extremely spacious, several times bigger than Woqing Sanctum, with magnificent structures throughout. Pavilions, towers, and mansions were interconnected by bridges and upturned eaves, and mountain mists swirled majestically around all of it. Dancing cranes completed the breathtaking sight.

As soon as they stepped through, Yanlie's disciple came up to welcome them. "The banquet is being held in the Windsurf Pavilion to the east. This way, please."

Sword riding wasn't permitted in the three sanctums, so they had to walk—which saved Mo Tianliao, who couldn't fly yet, from losing face.

The Windsurf Pavilion was a spacious open-air pavilion nestled among the flowers. A lot of long, low tables had been set up inside, and quite a few people had already taken their seats. At the front was a slightly raised stone platform, which was clearly meant for Yanlie.

Yanlie was the eldest personal disciple of Tianlang-zhenren, the sect leader, and he held the highest status among all the first-generation disciples. He was a genius with a fire-element heaven attribute.

Typically, grand celebrations weren't held for birthdays when the elders were still around, but Yanlie was well-liked, and several of his fellow disciples had insisted on throwing him a banquet. He had recently

succeeded in breaking through to the nascent soul stage, besides, and the sect leader had been so delighted that he'd given his consent.

The disciple directed Mo Tianliao to the foremost jade table. "Your seat is the first on the east side."

Mo Tianliao nodded and walked over.

The silver patterns on his black silk robes were rather conspicuous in the sunlight, but the rest of his black outfit seemed to absorb all the light. He gave off an indescribably oppressive aura. The moment he entered, the lively hall fell silent. Ignoring their reaction, Mo Tianliao made a beeline for his seat, lifted the hem of his robe, and sat down.

Xuanji-zhenren's personal disciples had yet to arrive; only the sect leader's personal disciples were present so far. Each one carried himself with dignity and composure. When they saw Mo Tianliao, they nodded in greeting.

The hall livened up again, and the second-generation disciples sitting in the back began to whisper.

"I can't believe it's him!"

"Who's that? He's so imposing."

"Haven't you heard? He's the personal disciple Qingtong-zhenren just took. Apparently he was chosen because he's handsome."

Mo Tianliao poured himself a cup of wine from the jade teapot before him and took a sip. Sweet, aromatic, and rich in spiritual energy; this was an excellent wine.

Suwen sat at the table behind Mo Tianliao and introduced the first-generation disciples to him in hushed tones.

The sect leader had five personal disciples. Beside Yanlie, two others were present today: Zimo, the baby-faced second disciple dressed in purple; and Bailuo, the steely-looking third disciple dressed in white.

“Moxiong, his fourth disciple, is out training with my shifu,” Suwen explained. “And Langzi, the fifth disciple, is still young, so he doesn’t participate in these banquets.”

Mo Tianliao nodded slightly and looked at the two people sitting on either side of him.

Yanlie was certainly well-versed in etiquette. He’d given Mo Tianliao the frontmost seat while his two juniors took the less-honorary seats—this was a show of respect to Woqing Sanctum. The row of seats opposite him was clearly reserved for Xuanji’s disciples.

Zimo was seated beside him, and he seemed rather hyperactive. When he saw Mo Tianliao approach, he couldn’t resist striking up a conversation. “I’m Zimo, Tianlang-zhenren’s second disciple. You can call me Zimo-shixiong or Zi-shixiong. How may I address you?”

“Greetings, Shixiong. I’m Mo Tianliao,” Mo Tianliao answered warmly.

“Then I’ll call you Mo-shidi from now on!” Zimo looked very happy. “This is so much better. Don’t ever take after your eldest shixiong. He’s always so fierce.”

Mo Tianliao smiled and said nothing.

Zimo elbowed his junior, Tianlang-zhenren’s third disciple. “Xiao-Bai, say hello!”

“Greetings, Bai-shixiong!” Mo Tianliao cupped his hands in greeting.

Bailuo carefully put down his wine cup, looked over slowly, paused for a moment, and raised his hands in a greeting. “Greetings, I’m Bailuo.” Mo Tianliao was startled; Bailuo had a soft, weak voice that was very much at odds with his dashing appearance.

“Here, let’s toast to our first formal meeting today, since we didn’t get to do it at the grand hall the last time!” Zimo topped up Mo Tianliao’s cup, and Mo Tianliao reciprocated by refilling Zimo and Bailuo’s cups as well. The trio toasted, instantly warming up the atmosphere. Of course, that warm atmosphere was basically just Zimo chattering nonstop to Mo Tianliao, while Bailuo quietly drank by himself and occasionally glanced over to listen to their conversation.

As they chatted, Xuanji-zhenren’s disciples made a grand entrance.

Xuanji-zhenren had the most disciples—over ten—but only three were his personal disciples; the rest were just ordinary disciples.

Of the three sanctum-masters, Xuanji was most fond of taking in disciples, but he had a mercurial temperament. Often, he would happily accept them only to lose interest a couple of days later and relegate them to being ordinary disciples instead.

The group walked over, led by a tall, slender man in a multicolored outfit: a long dark green robe topped by a dark red outer robe and secured with a bright yellow belt. He was pretty, with delicate features.

“Hey, Huaqing, not wearing that fancy *butterflies among flowers* dress today?” Zimo shouted at him.

The man promptly stumbled. “Shut up!” he hissed back through gritted teeth. “It’s not a dress!”

“Where’s Yuan-shixiong and Yu-shidi?” Zimo turned to introduce the newcomers to Mo Tianliao. The one leading the group was Huaqing, Xuanji-zhenren’s second disciple and a flamboyant dresser, while those following behind him were forgettable ordinary disciples or disciples without confirmed status.

“Yuan-shixiong is in seclusion, and Yu-shidi is out with Shifu,” Huaqing said, glaring at Zimo, as he took the first seat on the right. The two tables behind him were empty, and neither Bailuo or Zimo wanted to go over and sit with him. Huaqing grabbed the youngest disciple. “Cheng-shidi, come sit here.”

This was Xuanji-zhenren’s newest disciple, the one with a heaven attribute. His name was Cheng Xi, and his status was undetermined as yet. Cheng Xi politely demurred for a moment before acquiescing and taking his seat.

Mo Tianliao withdrew his gaze, clinked cups with Zimo, and finished his wine. The youth was clearly getting a bit too big for his britches, sitting there as if he owned the place, unaware of the jealousy and mockery in the eyes of his seniors staring daggers from behind him.

Just then, a clear voice rang out from nearby.

“Ha ha, sorry to keep everyone waiting.” Yanlie was dressed in red and gave off the overwhelming aura of a newly advanced nascent soul cultivator; he still had yet to learn to control it at will. He strode up to the host seat and smiled. “Thank you, everyone, for gracing my birthday feast today with your presence. As a show of gratitude, I shall offer the first toast!” He raised his cup and downed the wine in one gulp.

His straightforward manner quickly won everyone over, and they raised their cups in response with words of congratulations.

Mo Tianliao looked up at Yanlie. His mesmerizing eyes carried a hint of a smile, and the calm, unhurried way he spoke was truly pleasant to the ears. No wonder he was so well-liked in Woyun Sect.

“Let’s just enjoy ourselves today!” he said, beaming at the gathered crowd. “We rarely get a chance to take a break from cultivating, so we should relax and get drunk!”

Attendants filed into the hall, bearing spiritual fruits and dishes.

Mo Tianliao looked at the feast before him. Even if a cultivator abstained from food, they could still eat for pleasure, meat and vegetables alike. But those from the orthodox sects often only consumed spiritual wine or spiritual fruits, to keep up their ethereal, dignified image. A spread of steaming hot dishes like this was really rare.

“These drumsticks are delicious! Xiao-Bai, try one!” Zimo grinned at Bailuo with a drumstick in his mouth. Bailuo glared at him coldly and placed the plate of drumsticks before Mo Tianliao.

“Hey, give them to me if you aren’t eating. Why give them to him?!” Zimo protested, making to grab the plate.

Mo Tianliao picked up the plate. “Bai-shixiong gave them to me.”

Zimo’s eyes widened, and he glared. “Why, you little…”

Cheng Xi pursed his lips. “Giving priority to the elders is a sect rule. What is Mo-shidi doing, snatching food from shixiong?” *He* was supposed to be the gifted one, but he still had no status to his name. Meanwhile this dual-attribute guy could get into the sect with just his looks *and* get to be

Qingtong-zhenren's disciple?! Even worse, he was acting like he was on equal footing with the sect leader's disciples.

The lively atmosphere came to an abrupt halt.

Huaqing rolled his eyes. *This junior really can't read the room. Can't you see Mo Tianliao is just joking around? Besides, Mo Tianliao is a personal disciple, while your own status hasn't even been confirmed yet; what do you think you're doing calling him shidi?!*

Yanlie stepped forward and broke the awkward silence. "Mo-shidi, I'm so glad you could make it today. Here, let's drink. Don't hesitate to tell me if you ever encounter any difficulties in the sect."

Mo Tianliao stood up. "Thank you, Shixiong. Let me toast you."

After the toast, Mo Tianliao motioned for Suwen to bring out Woqing Sanctum's gift, some spiritual stones and herbs. "This is a little something from the disciples of our realm, to wish you a happy birthday."

Yanlie accepted them with a smile and passed them along to Chifeng, his disciple, behind him.

"My shizun can't come as he's in seclusion, so I've brought along his gift and his congratulations for breaking through to the nascent soul stage." Mo Tianliao presented an exquisite box. Its lid was open, revealing the beautifully wrought, fist-sized bell within.

The corner of Yanlie's lips twitched almost imperceptibly at the sight of the bell. He quickly closed the lid and held it up in his hands as he bowed to the east. "Thank you, Shishu, for the gift."

Huaqing had Cheng Xi present their master's gift too—a long box with its lid tightly closed.

Cheng Xi saw that Mo Tianliao's box was open, with what he thought was clearly a rare spiritual treasure sparkling inside, so, wanting to make his own master look good too, he took it upon himself to open their box before handing it over to Yanlie.

Mo Tianliao glanced over to see a fine piece of…long hemp rope. Yep. Just a big rope! And looking at it with the eyes of a master artificer, he could tell it was a genuine, ordinary piece of hemp rope. It wouldn't even qualify as a magical artifact.

Glaring at Cheng Xi, Huaqing quickly shut the box and handed it over to Yanlie with a smile.

Acting like he hadn't seen it, Yanlie respectfully accepted the box and bowed in gratitude toward the west.

And so the banquet ended on a seemingly harmonious note.

Mo Tianliao returned to Woqing Sanctum and went to see his master.

But the attendants expressionlessly blocked his way. "The sanctum-master is currently meeting the sect leader."

"Well then, I'll come back later." Mo Tianliao returned to his courtyard. His cat was missing again, leaving behind only a bedsheet decorated with frayed threads and tiny holes lying pitifully on the bed.

Frowning, Mo Tianliao considered all of the furball's frequent haunts, then made his way to the back mountain.

MINI EXTRA

Disciple A: That hemp rope must be some great treasure.

Disciple B: Yeah. Just look at how sturdy that mile-and-a-half-long rope bridge is.

Woodworker: Xuanji Brand Hemp Rope—Quality Guaranteed. Trusted By All.

Chapter 12:
Lack of Money

OTHER THAN HIS MASTER, only Mo Tianliao and the local wildlife were permitted to enter the back mountain, so it was very quiet and peaceful. Leaves crunched underfoot as he walked along the forest path toward the stream where he often grilled food. Pawpaw liked to sleep on the round stone by the stream where the sun shone, and he could doze there for the entire day.

As he got closer, he began to hear the sound of distant barking. His heart skipped a beat. Pawpaw was a spirit beast, so ordinary stray dogs would tuck their tails between their legs and run at the sight of him. They wouldn't bark so arrogantly. Worried, he quickened his pace.

"Arf! Arwooo…" The barks were short, but not angry. As he pushed aside the foliage, Mo Tianliao saw a gray-and-white wolf. With its gleaming spiritual glow, it was clearly a high-level spirit beast. It had a strong, muscular build, with gray fur on its back and white fur on its belly. Its tail stood stiff and unbending. There was no way it could be a dog. But on a closer inspection, something didn't seem right.

The white cat was sunbathing lazily on the stone as the gray-and-white wolf circled it again and again. The cat ignored it, so it put its front paws up on the stone and leaned in to sniff the cat. Casting it a sidelong glance, the cat raised his paw, claws glinting, and swatted at it.

"Arwoo—" The wolf jolted back and tried to lick its scratched snout with its tongue, but unfortunately, it couldn't reach it. It had to tilt its head and stretch its tongue as far as it could before it finally got a lick in.

Satisfied at last, it spun around in circles, barked twice, and stood on the stone again, wagging its tail happily.

The corners of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched. This was actually a feral wolf*dog*, right? And a silly dog at that.

Since the dog clearly wasn't going to harm the cat, Mo Tianliao watched them play—or rather, watched the dog try to nudge the cat with its nose, only to receive endless scratches from all angles.

Eventually, the dog got impatient. It stepped back, leaped onto the stone, and opened its jaws to bite the cat.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Mo Tianliao picked up a pebble and threw it at the dog.

Infused with spiritual energy, the stone went hurtling toward the dog's head. The dog nimbly dodged before it could hit, but the flying pebble had startled it, and, scrambling to find purchase with all four paws, it skidded off the stone.

Mo Tianliao walked over with another pebble ready in his hand, feeling slightly tense. Even if this was just a level one spirit beast, it would be more powerful than him, a mere cultivator at the qi-refining stage. In a real fight, he wouldn't stand a chance. But no matter how powerful an unevolved spirit beast was, it was still a wild beast driven by animal instinct.

Sure enough, the dog instinctively shrank back at the sight of the pebble. It looked at the cat on the stone, then at Mo Tianliao. Finally, it whimpered, turned tail, and scampered off.

Mo Tianliao tossed aside the pebble and ran over to the stream. "Pawpaw, are you okay?" He scooped up the little cat and stroked the damp

fur on the back of its neck where the dog had nipped it.

The white cat looked up at him and lazily swatted his face with a paw. He didn't brandish his claws, though, so Mo Tianliao got gently smacked by his toebeans. He broke out in a grin and planted a kiss on the warm paw.

"Is that dog your friend?" Mo Tianliao, still dressed in the ornate black robe he'd worn to the feast, fished out a black silk handkerchief embroidered with silver cloud patterns and wiped the drool off his cat's fur as he walked.

The cat gave him a look. *You knew it was my friend, and you still threw rocks at it?*

"It's fine to play with dogs, but don't let them bite you. They have big mouths, and they can't control their strength. Plus, we wouldn't want you to get your fur all dirty," Mo Tianliao said righteously. He wasn't about to admit he'd been jealous of a dog.

On the way back, he suddenly realized something. The dog and Pawpaw were both spirit beasts, and they'd been openly playing on the back mountain. His master must have been aware of this. His master didn't allow ordinary disciples onto the back mountain—perhaps that wasn't just to protect the spiritual herbs and trees there, but also to protect these spirit beasts who had yet to sign a blood pact.

"There are quite a number of spirit beasts in the sect, but we aren't qualified enough to see them," Suheng explained later on, with a smile, when Mo Tianliao came to report on sect affairs. Apparently, spirit beasts were awarded to disciples who had made significant contributions or

advanced to the nascent soul stage. Everyone else had to find their own spirit beast if they wanted one.

Mo Tianliao nodded. “Are the spirit beasts in the sect registered somewhere?”

“Of course,” said Suheng. “But the register is in the sanctum-masters’ hands. The average person isn’t permitted to see it.”

Mo Tianliao dismissed Suheng and petted the cat sleeping soundly in his arms. His master had given him a jade token, allowing him access to the back mountain. Wasn’t he worried Mo Tianliao might forcibly sign a blood pact with one of the spirit beasts and claim it as his own? Or maybe… Considering the rule that said personal disciples could come and go freely, did that mean personal disciples could also receive a spirit beast?

He decided to ask his master about it later, and to tell him that he wanted this cat. He snapped his fingers to light a candle. His first priority was to hurry up and raise his cultivation level, though, or he wouldn’t even be able to beat a dog in a fight.

Qingtong-zhenren was back in seclusion again. Mo Tianliao tried to meet him over and over again, but to no avail, so he resigned himself to chopping trees on the back mountain.

The spiritual energies of plants and trees could be absorbed, and the end of every chapter of his cultivation manual required him to grill some sort of food. Mo Tianliao was getting bored of it, so he’d started experimenting and practicing his control over the woodfire while he was at it. He had mastered the use of fire-element spiritual energy in his previous life, and now that he’d been gifted this otherworldly fire, he had to make good use of it and master both the flame itself and this technique.

Three months later, Mo Tianliao looked at the green flame shaped like a dragon in his hand and quirked a smile.

The fire dragon looked like a delicate, finely detailed living sculpture, its movements nimble, its long whiskers swaying in the wind with the subtle shift of spiritual energies. He sent the dragon swimming over to his cat, who was licking his paws. The cat froze for a moment, then tilted his head, contemplating this strange thing.

“I can’t make it any bigger than this for now. That’s all the woodfire I have.” Mo Tianliao scooted over to watch the fire dragon interact with the cat. It burned independently for a while before it dissipated and vanished.

The cat yawned and lay down to sleep.

It had taken Mo Tianliao a whole month to figure out how to separate the woodfire from his body. At first, all he could do was shoot out a few fireballs. But he’d been working on his control day and night, and now he could finally change the shape of the fire. And thanks to his constant tree-chopping and burning of wood, his cultivation had advanced to level six of the qi-refining stage.

With the body of a divine tree, he didn’t need to forge meridians. All he needed was to accumulate wood-element spiritual energy until he could establish his foundation. He estimated it would take him less than a year to reach that stage.

In his previous life, his aptitude had been all right, but after cultivating from his teens until he was twenty-eight, he’d only barely made it to the foundation establishment stage. And now, incredibly enough, that would only take a year. With mixed feelings, Mo Tianliao picked up the sleepy cat and carried it down the mountain.

After spending three months with this cat, Mo Tianliao had noticed a problem: The little furball slept way too much. He never spent more than four hours a day playing. An ordinary cat usually slept about fourteen hours, but this energetic spirit beast slept for twenty hours! That was abnormal.

Three hundred years ago, Pawpaw could play with him all day without getting tired. But now he'd start yawning when they'd been playing for just a little while. Mo Tianliao thought about asking an elixirist to look at Pawpaw, but the consultation fee was costly.

Mo Tianliao poured out the spiritual stones in his inventory bracelet and counted them—six medium-grade spiritual stones in total. Personal disciples had a monthly allowance of three medium-grade spiritual stones, equivalent to thirty low-grade spiritual stones, and this was already quite generous compared to ordinary disciples—they only got ten low-grade spiritual stones.

He'd used a piece of medium-grade spiritual stone when he advanced to level five of the qi-refining stage earlier, then another two to break through to level six. Hiring an elixirist to diagnose a spirit beast would require at least thirty medium-grade spiritual stones.

Mo Tianliao stroked the soundly sleeping kitty and put away his spiritual stones. Picking the kitten up in his arms, he made his way to the Blessed Sanctuary of the Crimson Flame. There were furnaces there, and he needed to forge some artifacts to earn some money.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Keeping a cat is expensive!

Sect Leader: Costs you your face too. *covers his wounds*

Xuanji: Agree +1.

Eldest Shixiong: Agree +10086.

Woodworker: Go away! My cat is only allowed to scratch *me*!

Chapter 13:
Artifact Crafting

EACH OF THE SEVENTY-TWO blessed sanctuaries served a different function, from artifact forging to elixir concoction, and even as a training ground for sword practice. If Mo Tianliao had stayed in the Blessed Sanctuary of a Thousand Sprouts, he might have been selected for transfer to the Blessed Sanctuary of the Crimson Flames in a couple of years. This particular site specialized in artifact crafting.

Located in the southeast, the Blessed Sanctuary of the Crimson Flame housed the Crimson Sunfire that the previous sect leader had harvested. While it couldn't compare to the Heavenforge Fire at Mo Tianliao's palace, it was still a high-grade fire. The Crimson Sunfire blazed all year in the blessed sanctuary, making it perfect for forging artifacts.

Each of the seventy-two blessed sanctuaries was unique in appearance as well. The Blessed Sanctuary of the Crimson Flame was a rocky mountain filled with stone chambers. A disciple stationed by the desk at the entrance stopped Mo Tianliao. "Who goes there?"

Mo Tianliao showed the jade token by his waist. "Mo Tianliao, a first-generation disciple of Woqing Sanctum."

The jade token slotted into the center of the protective array disk. Their energies matched, and the disk emitted a blue glow before fading back to normal.

The gatekeeper returned the token to Mo Tianliao and smiled. This young man before him may not have had very high cultivation, but he was a

personal disciple of a sanctum-master, so he couldn't afford to offend him. "Are you planning to forge artifacts?"

Mo Tianliao nodded. "I'd like a furnace chamber."

The gatekeeper waved a hand over the long bamboo slip on the table, and countless grids appeared. Some were marked with red dots, while others remained black.

"We currently have one premium fire chamber, three standard chambers, and fourteen economy chambers," the gatekeeper said with a smile. The price of each chamber type was clearly displayed on the bamboo slip.

Disciples of the Blessed Sanctuary of the Crimson Flames received free time allowance for crafting every month, but other disciples had to pay spiritual stones to use the chambers. Renting an economy chamber cost three low-grade spiritual stones a day, while a standard chamber required seven. A premium one would need one medium-grade spiritual stone.

Mo Tianliao frowned and calculated the time he needed for the artifacts he wanted to craft. It would take at least ten days. "Please give me an economy chamber with a stronger fire."

The gatekeeper nodded, unsurprised. Crafting artifacts required the cultivator to have precise control over their powers. This personal disciple was probably just experimenting with the forge for fun. After all, who'd ever heard of a cultivator forging magical artifacts at the qi-refining stage? An economy-level chamber would suffice.

"The southernmost chamber is almost the same as a standard chamber, but the price is slightly higher at four low-grade spiritual stones," the gatekeeper explained, his customer-service smile still in place.

Mo Tianliao nodded and gave him four medium-grade spiritual stones. “Just leave my meals at the door. Don’t disturb me unless necessary.”

Then he took the jade button which served as a key to the chambers and headed straight to the southernmost room.

“Tsk, tsk. It must be nice to be a personal disciple,” the gatekeeper remarked to his fellow disciple, once Mo Tianliao was out of earshot. “He didn’t hesitate at all to spend those spiritual stones.”

“His monthly allowance is three times more than ours, not to mention any extras he gets from his master. How can we compare?” The two sneered in envy at people like Mo Tianliao who had the protection of their masters.

A blast of heat hit Mo Tianliao as the stone door to the furnace chamber closed.

The entire stone chamber was clean and empty, save for a bronze furnace standing in the center. Firestones glowed, pulsing on and off beneath the furnace.

Mo Tianliao went over to the furnace and examined it, realizing immediately that the ranking of the chambers wasn’t solely based on the intensity of the fire, but also on the quality of the furnace itself. This bronze furnace was the most common type with no special functions, and was also prone to exploding.

However, he wasn’t planning to refine any advanced spiritual treasures, so this would be good enough.

“Meow!” The curious kitty in his arms poked his head out. Finding the place cozy and warm, he perked up and pawed his way out from inside

Mo Tianliao's robe.

Pawpaw had always loved tagging along whenever Mo Tianliao used to refine artifacts back at his palace. For a spirit beast with a water attribute, he was very fond of warm places. The little scamp dashed toward the firestones and batted one loose, instantly turning the scalding hot stone into a chunk of ice.

Mo Tianliao sat by the furnace and took out the materials he needed to refine from his inventory bracelet.

A few days ago, Mo Tianliao had made a routine visit to his master, but, once again, he hadn't been able to meet with him, so he'd gone to chat up the attendants in white. It turned out that they were the ones who had made his clothes.

"Wow, you must be incredibly talented to have made three full outfits in a single day." Mo Tianliao flashed a mesmerizing smile, his eyes curving into crescents. "Would you happen to have any leftover fabric?"

"Why do you want it?" one attendant asked.

Mo Tianliao scratched his head sheepishly. "I'd like to make some pouches to keep small odds and ends."

Inventory artifacts were expensive, and cultivators at the qi-refining stage often couldn't afford them, so they carried money pouches with them like the common folks.

The attendant's heart softened at the sight of this shy, handsome young man. "Just let us know what you need."

The next day, Mo Tianliao had received five beautifully made pouches with different patterns embroidered on them.

Now, in the chamber, Mo Tianliao took the five pouches out and emptied out their contents. They were filled with random fragments of materials he had picked up from the back mountain: dark iron ores, crystal ores, and so on; the biggest piece no larger than a baby's fist.

If any other artificer saw these, they'd have found it hilarious. The failure rate for refining artifacts was much higher than for concocting elixirs. Forging a dagger required at least a thirteen-inch dark iron ore. What possible use could these few thumb-sized pieces be?

"Meow!" The white cat rolled an ice ball over and batted it toward Mo Tianliao's foot.

When he caught it, the chill seeped into his skin, making him shiver. He set it down, picked the cat up, and caressed that soft little paw.

The back of the paw was covered in pure white fur, while the paw pad was pink. It felt soft and warm to the touch, although it was slightly cooler than Mo Tianliao's hand.

"I see." He set the cat down on his lap and stroked his fur, understanding beginning to dawn on him. The cat had still been young back at his palace, so he had only been capable of shooting balls of water at him, but now that he'd grown up, the distinctive characteristics of his spiritual attribute were manifesting. The cat's spiritual attribute wasn't just water, but ice—the strongest variant of the water element.

The difference between cultivators' body temperatures was determined by their spiritual attributes. Mo Tianliao, for example, had a body temperature slightly higher than the average person due to his fire attribute. This explained why the cat's temperature was naturally lower than

that of other cats—which was also why the little guy liked warm places so much.

“I’m going to start work now, so play by yourself, but stay away from fires.” Mo Tianliao placed the cat to the side, and took out a small, fist-sized carving knife he had swiped from Qingning Palace’s kitchen.

He started the furnace, picked up two scalding firestones, and struck them together. As soon as they burst into flames, he tossed them back under the furnace. The chambers were all interconnected under the floor, and the open flames quickly drew forth the ever-burning Crimson Sunfire.

The flames roared to life, instantly turning the bronze furnace red-hot.

Closing his eyes, Mo Tianliao used his powerful divine soul to manipulate the furnace and open the lid. He threw the ore fragments inside, closed it, and formed a seal with his hands. The bronze furnace began to rotate steadily. His slender fingers flew as he formed more seals and cast three of them into the furnace.

The tiny pieces of ore in the bronze furnace gradually separated and floated, allowing the heat to spread evenly. Mo Tianliao wiped the sweat from his forehead. At the qi-refining stage, his spiritual qi was extremely limited, and he had to take a break after just four hand seals. He took a breather, letting the Crimson Sunfire refine the ores. He’d have some free time before it completed this task.

The cat crouched by the bronze furnace, staring intently at it as it rotated, but after a while, he got tired. He lay down with a yawn and continued watching, his head moving in tandem with the furnace.

Leaving the cat alone, Mo Tianliao brought his hands to his energy core and meditated for a moment.

The fire chamber was brimming with fire-element spiritual energy, and it didn’t take Mo Tianliao long to absorb all he needed. He opened the furnace and picked out a piece of dark crystal ore. This originally gray stone was easy to refine, and it didn’t take long at all to turn into a transparent liquid floating above Mo Tianliao’s palm.

Enveloping his fingertip with spiritual energy, he dipped it into the liquid and quickly drew on the pouch he’d turned inside out, inscribing a flawless spatial spell array onto it. He turned it right side out, gathered spiritual energy into his palm, and quickly channeled it in. The fire-element spiritual energy gushed into the pouch, steadily expanding the space within.

“Meow!” The sleepy cat stood up, padded over, and stood with his front paws on Mo Tianliao’s knees to look at him.

The stream of spiritual energy abruptly cut off. The space, which had grown to the size of two wooden chests, could grow no further once the flow of spiritual energy had been interrupted. Mo Tianliao looked resignedly at the inventory pouch in his hand; this would probably only sell for five medium-grade spiritual stones.

“Meow!” Seeing him still looking at that lousy pouch, the cat swatted his knee in displeasure.

Mo Tianliao tossed the inventory pouch aside and picked up His Feline Lordship. “Your Lordship, how may I be of service to you?”

The white cat yawned, clearly sleepy.

Mo Tianliao’s lips curved into a smile as he cradled the cat and stroked his fur, then gently tucked him under his outer robe. Feeling the familiar warmth, the cat, who could barely keep his eyes open, stretched comfortably, snuggled against Mo Tianliao’s lower abdomen, and drifted off into a contented sleep.

MINI EXTRA

Pawpaw: Which is more important, me or artifact forging?

Woodworker: Uh…

Pawpaw: *flashes claws*

Woodworker: You, of course, ah ha ha! What’s forging compared to you? Come here, I’ll be your cushion.

Pawpaw: Great answer. Here’s a slap as your reward.

Woodworker: QAQ

Chapter 14:
Sect Leader

AFTER LULLING THE CAT to sleep, Mo Tianliao once again concentrated on making inventory pouches. The quality of an inventory pouch depended on two factors: how smooth and complete the dark crystal ore array was, and the amount of spiritual energy infused.

A spatial array was the foundation of all inventory-type magical artifacts. It was highly complex, with both spatial-overlaying and spiritual energy-storing arrays inscribed inside. Any interruptions or irregularity could result in storage space instability or spiritual energy leakage. This was why these magical artifacts were so expensive.

Usually, an artificer would carefully draw the array with a precious array-drawing brush. It was typical to take at least a day to finish a set, as the whole array would be invalidated if even a single stroke was wrong.

Mo Tianliao, on the other hand, drew so fast his finger was a blur. With his pretty, half-lidded eyes, he appeared laid-back, finishing a set in a quarter of an hour or so. He slowly infused spiritual energy into an array for about half an hour, then stopped to take a breath. At the sixth level of the qi-refining stage, he only had enough spiritual energy to create a space half the size of a room.

He meditated for a moment, recovering his depleted spiritual energy. By then, the dark iron ore in the furnace was ready. Picking up the small knife, Mo Tianliao coated the blade with the dark iron ore solution. Then, with fingers enveloped in spiritual energy, he quickly molded it into a strange shape with a sharp hook at the tip, for use as a carving blade.

He took out his biggest piece of raw material yet—a log of Sinking Agarwood he'd harvested from the back mountain. Using the knife, he split the wood and pared it down into thin wooden spikes about four inches long.

Time passed. Outside, the gatekeeping disciples discussed Mo Tianliao as they drank. "That guy from Woqing Sanctum has seriously been in there for ten days."

His companion stroked his beard knowingly. "Maybe he's practicing. People with fire spiritual attributes often come here for the seclusion."

The others thought so too. After all, there was no way a cultivator at level six of the qi-refining stage could actually forge any magical artifacts.

"These personal disciples just have too much money to burn. The three sanctums are practically brimming with spiritual energy, so anyone can cultivate sitting in their own room. And then there's this guy, wasting money on a pointless endeavor."

"I know, right…"

They were still chatting away when someone placed a jade button gently on the wooden tray on the desk and casually said, "Here you go." His voice was low and pleasant, but tired.

Before anyone could react, he turned and left.

The disciples looked at the departing figure of the man in black and traded looks, wondering uneasily just how much of their conversation he had overheard.

The gatekeeper caught up to him. "Shishu, please hold on."

Mo Tianliao looked back. "What is it?" The furnace was so low quality that Mo Tianliao had gone without sleep for a few days out of fear it

would explode. He desperately needed to sleep, so his temper wasn't particularly good at that moment.

His cold gaze sent a shiver through the gatekeeper, who hurriedly took out two pieces of low-grade spiritual stone. "You didn't use the full ten days, so we should refund you two stones—"

"You can use it to get some wine for yourselves." Mo Tianliao didn't wait for an answer. He left with a flick of his sleeve.

Rather than going to pay his respects to his master on returning to Woqing Sanctum, Mo Tianliao headed straight for his courtyard, where he activated the protective barrier array and went right to bed.

The fluffy white cat crawled out of his arms and sat on his chest, looking down at him. The handsome face had darkened from days of being surrounded by flames and smoke, and there were even faint dark circles under his eyes.

He jumped off the bed, materializing into Qingtong in a flash of white light. The man in the flowing white robe continued to look at Mo Tianliao with disdain in his eyes. *Dummy! Don't you know you should cover yourself with a blanket when you've just exited a fire chamber? You don't have fur to keep you warm. What if you catch a cold? Who's going to warm my bed?!*

Pursing his lips, he pulled over the thin quilt from the side and threw it over Mo Tianliao. With his hands clasped behind his back, he circled the room once. Then, assuming Mo Tianliao wouldn't be waking up anytime soon, he left.

He had only just stepped into the grand hall of Qingning Palace when an attendant stepped forth and handed him a voice transmission talisman.

“Zhenren, the sect leader has a message for you.”

Qingtong traced his finger over the talisman, and Tianlang-zhenren’s steady voice came through: “*I’ve just returned from Qingyun Sect. Do you two want to meet up?*”

The talisman burst into flames after playing the message. Qingtong threw away the burning talisman and left again.

Disputes often arose among the various orthodox sects, which required the three great sects to mediate. In these cases, this would often result in the distribution of benefits, so whenever the sect leader returned from mediation, he brought back a lot of good stuff.

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AT TIANNING PALACE in Wotian Sanctum, Tianlang-zhenren, the sect leader, sat in the principal seat, exuding an ethereal, extraordinary aura. All the disciples in the hall looked at him with reverent eyes.

Tianlang-zhenren smiled affably. “You’ve all worked hard. Here’s a Soul-Soothing Elixir for each of you.”

The disciples said their thanks, took a bottle each, and left contented.

“Was your trip fruitful this time?” Xuanji-zhenren entered just as the disciples left with their elixir bottles. The Soul-Soothing Elixir was suitable for disciples below the core formation stage, when their divine souls had yet to fully form.

The presence of demonic energy in spiritual energies meant that cultivators, whether they were orthodox or demonic, would be occasionally

troubled by the accumulated demonic energy, leading to inner turmoil. Those without soul beasts to soothe them would have to consume elixirs in order to suppress it. To cultivators, these elixirs were as indispensable as spiritual stones.

Tianlang-zhenren stroked his beard. “Not too bad. Qingyun Sect took over a small sect of elixirists and had to bleed a little to smooth things over.”

Once all the disciples in the hall had left, Tianlang-zhenren glanced around and removed several dark-colored jade bottles from his inventory ring. “These—”

A white silhouette flashed past, sweeping the table clean. Qingtong sat elegantly on the only soft couch in the room, with the bottles of elixir neatly arranged on the small table before him.

“Hey, don’t take them all. Leave one for me.” Tianlang-zhenren jumped to his feet and rushed over to Qingtong, but a fair, slender finger pressed against his forehead before he could grab one of the bottles.

Qingtong scanned the bottles before him, but he didn’t find what he wanted, so he disinterestedly swept the bottles onto the floor.

“Nooo—!” Tianlang-zhenren cried out, lunging to catch all the jade bottles with his wide sleeves, then crouching on the ground, holding them tightly in his arms. He looked up, planning to give Qingtong a piece of his mind, but when he met that pair of beautiful eyes, he instantly wilted. He tossed the bottle meant for Xuanji over and quickly stored the remainder in his inventory ring.

“Take it out.” Qingtong kicked the sect leader crouching by the soft couch.

“You do know I’m the sect leader, right?!” Tianlang-zhenren sprang up, unable to bear it anymore. The sect leader’s power was unfathomable, and this leap, propelled by rage, was an incredible force to behold. Golden spiritual energy instantly flooded the grand hall, making their skin prickle painfully. The disciples standing guard outside quickly retreated when they felt the intimidating power of the sect leader’s outburst.

“So rowdy.” Qingtong slapped Tianlang on the back of the head, the force of it sending the sect leader face-planting into the cushion. The golden aura in the hall instantly vanished.

In the distance, Xuanji-zhenren shrank back, wisely choosing to remain silent.

The sect leader squatted with his head in his hands for a moment before taking out a white-jade bottle. “Heaven-grade soul-condensing pills.”

Qingtong took it and kept staring at him.

The sect leader gritted his teeth and fished out two red jade bottles. “Heaven-grade fire-attribute pills.”

Qingtong took them and rotated them in his hand.

“That’s it!” the sect leader insisted.

The gorgeous man leaned against the pillow on the couch and propped up his head with a hand. He flicked out a finger, turning the rounded, neat nail into a sharp, glinting, translucent claw.

“Awooo…” A mournful howl rang out from the grand hall. A dark barrier activated immediately, blocking the sound from escaping. A weird silence fell over Tianning Palace.

The disciples outside moved even further away from Tianning Palace's main hall when the barrier showed up. "The sect leader and the two sanctum-masters must be discussing some important matters."

Moments later, calm returned to the hall.

The white cat sat on the couch, gracefully licking his paw, while the gray-and-white wolf lay prone on the ground with his two front paws hugging his head and his hind legs splayed out, feigning death.

The gorgeous man rematerialized in a flash of white light and put away the row of jade bottles from the small table. "I'm going out for a few days. Don't bother me even if something crops up," he said flatly. Then he transformed into a ray of light, streaking toward Woqing Sanctum.

Xuanji-zhenren walked out slowly from the corner he had been in and squatted by the wolf's side. "Uh, I'll take my leave, then." Without waiting for his senior's response, he fled.

***

BACK IN HIS COURTYARD, Mo Tianliao woke up feeling refreshed and stretched. Just then, the cat busted through the window and crashed into his arms.

"Pawpaw…" Mo Tianliao caught the little furball and looked at the torn window paper in resignation. He'd have to repair it again.

"Meow!" The cat was in a good mood. He greeted him with a swat.

Mo Tianliao chuckled and took him into his arms. "Let's go down the mountain and get ourselves some good food."

MINI EXTRA

Sect Leader: Even I’m scared of myself when I get angry.

Pawpaw: Uh-huh.

Sect Leader: Keep disrespecting your elder like this and I won’t play nice anymore!

Pawpaw: Uh-huh.

Sect Leader: I’m really going to lose my temper!

Pawpaw: Go on.

Sect Leader: *unable to bear it anymore* Arf arf arf arf!

Chapter 15:
Trading

MO TIANLIAO HEADED for Qingning Palace and left his master a voice transmission talisman, letting him know he was going down to the marketplace at the foot of the mountain and would be back in a few days. Then he left Woyun Sect with his cat.

Woyun Sect had strict rules for the ordinary disciples. They had to ask in advance if they wanted to leave the sect grounds, and there was also a yearly limit to the number of days they could step out of the sect. A disciple at the sixth level of the qi-refining stage, like Mo Tianliao, would be allowed six days outside at most.

But personal disciples didn't have any such restrictions as long as they had permission from their master. And Mo Tianliao's master's only requirement for him was: *Do whatever you want*.

Mo Tianliao had learned from his fellow juniors that there was a cultivator marketplace about fifteen miles down the mountain from Woyun Sect.

Wildflowers bloomed along the mountain path, complete with butterflies dancing around. The cat struggled to get out of Mo Tianliao's arms. Resigned, Mo Tianliao set him down. "I'll walk slowly. Stay with me and don't run off."

Mo Tianliao patted the cat on the head and walked a few steps before looking back—the cat hadn't moved. A blue butterfly flitted over the cat's head, and he sprang and smacked it down under his paw. That was no fun—

he released it. The startled butterfly flew away unsteadily, stirring up the cat's interest again. He leaped up again and swatted at it.

It didn't take long for the frolicking cat to be covered in flower petals and grass clippings. Displeased, he jumped out of the cluster of flowers and shook his fur off.

"Let's stop playing and get going now," Mo Tianliao said wearily, standing a few steps away.

The cat glanced back at him and ignored him. Staying exactly where he was, he sat there and cleaned himself; he was about to move on to licking his paw when he realized it was covered in dirt. He shook it disdainfully before trotting over to Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao smiled in relief. The little guy was finally following him. But just as he was about to keep walking, he felt a tug at his clothes and looked down—the white furball was hanging from the hem.

After a moment's silence, Mo Tianliao resigned himself to his fate and picked up His Feline Lordship.

"Meow!" The cat pointedly showed him his dirty paws.

Understanding his intent, Mo Tianliao took out a handkerchief and water flask and cleaned each paw. Soon, the grimy paws returned to their soft, tender state. But the cat no longer felt like walking; instead, he clambered up Mo Tianliao's collar and sprang onto his head.

"Meow!" the cat announced happily. Mo Tianliao smiled, somehow feeling that His Feline Lordship had said, *Giddy-up!* It seemed like his dream of walking with the cat following behind him wasn't going to manifest.

With His Feline Lordship on his head, Mo Tianliao made his way down the mountain. He still couldn't ride his sword at his present cultivation level, but his body was as light as a swallow's, and it only took him a few hours to arrive at the edge of the marketplace.

There were always various cultivators' marketplaces and towns around the orthodox sects. They fell under the protection of the sects and generally didn't have many common folks living there; instead, they were mostly inhabited by unaffiliated cultivators. Cultivators from the sect would also often come to search for materials they needed for cultivation.

This marketplace was called Auspicious Bazaar. It was a long street with two public squares at the ends. The shape resembled a jade ruyi, an auspicious symbol of fortune and prosperity—hence the name.

Mo Tianliao lifted the sleeping cat off his head, tucked him in the front of his collar, and smoothed his hair before he entered.

There were many stalls in the square selling wines imbued with spiritual energies, elixirs, ores, and even trinkets. These were small businesses that couldn't afford the exorbitant rent on the street, so they set up shop here.

Of course, there were even more uncategorized odds and ends, likely from cultivators who'd acquired them during their outdoor training but didn't need them, so they set up stalls to sell their extra items for spiritual stones or to trade them for other items.

Mo Tianliao took a quick look around before heading straight for the shops on the street trading in magical artifacts.

He hadn't stepped into the secular world for three centuries, so he first visited several shops to determine the average prices of inventory

pouches. They cost about the same as he remembered, so he eventually settled on Auspicious Lodge, as their items were the most exquisite and their prices were slightly higher.

“Welcome. What would you like?” The shopkeeper, who looked to be in his forties or fifties by mortal standards, smiled. “Our Auspicious Lodge has the most comprehensive selection in all of Auspicious Bazaar.”

“I’d like to trade my sable fur for some fine wine,” Mo Tianliao said mildly.

The shopkeeper paused for a moment before putting on a different smile. “We do have fine wine here. This way, please.”

This was a coded phrase among the artificers: *I’d like to trade my sable fur for some fine wine, and you may buy my precious blade for a thousand gold.* It was meant to prevent artificers carrying spiritual treasures from being targeted before a transaction and to remind the shopkeepers that this was a knowledgeable artificer who should be given a fair price.

There was a small, elegantly decorated tearoom inside.

The shopkeeper poured Mo Tianliao a cup of tea and sat across from him. “You can already craft artifacts. That’s very impressive for someone so young.” His small eyes swept over Mo Tianliao, twinkling meaningfully.

Mo Tianliao accepted the tea. “You think too highly of me. I’m just a cultivator at the qi-refining stage. I’m here to sell a few items on my master’s behalf.”

The shopkeeper’s smile deepened. “So, you’re the disciple of a great master. Feel free to show us what you have. We always offer more for items than the other shops.”

Mo Tianliao wasted no time taking out three of the five inventory pouches he had refined—he was saving two for his own use. The pouches were pretty, made from high-quality silk with fine workmanship.

The shopkeeper's eyes lit up. Many inventory pouches had large spaces but looked ugly, so they couldn't be sold for very high. He took them and scrutinized them. The storage space was limited but extremely stable, with abundant spiritual energy secured within and no leakage.

"Excellent craftsmanship!" the shopkeeper marveled. The skill displayed in the drawing of the array could only have come from a top master artificer, but the space was so small…

"My master drew the array, while I infused it with spiritual energy."

The shopkeeper, a cultivator in the middle stage of the foundation establishment stage, nodded in understanding. "This is really a marvelous array. A pity the space is so small." The shopkeeper offered six medium-grade spiritual stones for the first inventory pouch that His Feline Lordship had interrupted, and fifteen medium-grade spiritual stones each for the other two with storage space half the size of a room.

Mo Tianliao nodded in agreement, although he took only thirty-five spiritual stones and let the shopkeeper keep the last one. "There's something I'd like to ask you."

"Ask away." The shopkeeper put away the spiritual stone, suitably impressed by this savvy young cultivator.

"Have you heard about Lord Duantian's divine artifact?" Mo Tianliao whispered.

The shopkeeper frowned. "Of course. Are you asking about its whereabouts?"

“My master is obsessed with artifact crafting and wishes to see that artifact once in his lifetime,” Mo Tianliao said, wearing a look of resignation.

“That’s to be expected. Who doesn’t yearn for a divine artifact?” The shopkeeper smiled and looked around before lowering his own voice. “Many great masters perished on Mount Yanhuo back then, and Duantian’s body was never found. People who went there later only found a scattering of treasures. Duantian didn’t have the divine artifact with him; it was in the Supreme Heaven Ablaze Furnace back at his palace. Unfortunately, someone had taken it beforehand.”

When a divine artifact showed up, people would naturally rush to acquire it, stirring up a storm of carnage. But the fight had died down once they realized that no one—not even the Qingyun sect leader—could use this divine artifact. It was still unfinished, after all. What’s more, the artifact had an irreversible crack in it from being prematurely removed from the furnace. Even the best master artificer of the orthodox path would be hard-pressed to fix it.

The shopkeeper sighed. “There is probably no one else in this world other than Lord Duantian who can forge a divine artifact.”

As for its whereabouts, the last time it had been mentioned was at the orthodox sects’ grand meet a century ago, when it had been in Qingyun Sect’s possession. After that, nobody knew where it had gone, although rumor had it that the number one thief of the cultivation world had stolen it away and auctioned it off at some black market.

“I haven’t left this marketplace for years, so my information isn’t up to date,” the shopkeeper told him. “If you want to know more, you should

go to the city further away and ask around.”

Mo Tianliao thanked the shopkeeper, put away his spiritual stones in his inventory pouch, tossed the pouch into his inventory bracelet, and walked out of Auspicious Lodge.

Inventory artifacts typically couldn’t store other inventory artifacts. But this bracelet Duantian had refined, though small in storage space, had another advantage aside from being lightning-resistant—the ability to store other inventory artifacts. No one else apart from him knew about this. After all, the ability to resist a lightning tribulation was far more valuable than extra storage capacity, even if that so-called lightning-resistance feature actually only applied to the bracelet itself.

“Meow…” The cat woke up, stretched lazily, and tried to climb upward.

Mo Tianliao hastily pressed down on his collar to prevent the cat from poking his head out. Displeased, the cat scratched Mo Tianliao’s waist through his inner garment.

Mo Tianliao tried to hold back both his ticklish laughter and his instinct to avoid the scratches, fearing onlookers might realize he had a spirit beast with him. Managing to keep a straight face, he entered a shop selling magical outfits and bought a large black cloak to cover himself with. Then he finally allowed the misbehaving furball to emerge, tousling his fur when he did.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Lightning-Resistant Bracelet! Selling for only 998! 998!!!

Cultivator A: Buy, buy, buy! A Duantian original, quality assured!

Cultivator B: Buy, buy, buy! A peerless treasure, essential for lightning tribulation!

Transparent Ghost of the Patriarch Who Underwent a Lightning Tribulation: What a scam! Lightning-resistant, my ass! Didn’t I still get obliterated?!

Cultivator A & B: *pocketing the endorsement fee* 998 to protect a single wrist from being obliterated is a bargain!

Patriarch Who Underwent a Lightning Tribulation: QAQ

Chapter 16:
Frost Jade

"MEOW!" Pawpaw got angry and swiped at him. *Insolent disciple! How dare you ruffle my fur!*

Mo Tianliao hissed in pain and pulled his hand out from the cloak—as expected, he was already bleeding.

Not daring to further incur the wrath of His Feline Lordship, Mo Tianliao pulled his hands out and let the cat wriggle around underneath. This cloak had cost him three medium-grade spiritual stones. As long as no one used their divine soul to probe, it could mask the faint spiritual aura emitted by a cultivator, hiding their cultivation.

Mo Tianliao headed over to the easternmost public square. According to the shopkeeper, there was an auction house there.

Aside from shops like those in the mortal world, cultivator marketplaces also had auction houses. Rare materials, elixirs, or spiritual treasures with no fixed prices had to be traded in places like this, where the highest bidder would get to claim possession.

Mo Tianliao approached the black stone building, and an attendant came over to meet him. "Greetings, sir. There's no auction today. You'll have to wait for tomorrow."

Auctions naturally wouldn't be held every day. Usually, they took place every few days. After all, rare items didn't simply fall from the sky.

"Consignment," Mo Tianliao said from under the cloak in a deep, raspy voice, sounding like an old man.

The attendant, a junior cultivator at the second level of the qi-refining stage, guessed that the man in the black cloak might be an artificer or elixirist. Not daring to slight him, he led him inside.

“May I have a look at the treasure you’d like to consign for sale?” There was an appraiser in the room who would determine if the goods were worth putting on auction, as there was no lack of people trying to pass off inferior stuff as quality goods.

Mo Tianliao glanced at the appraiser, who had to have at least reached the foundation establishment stage. When he probed a little with his divine sense, however, he was startled to find that the man was actually at the early core formation stage. It did make sense. Even the smallest auction house had precious treasures, and they’d have a hard time running any auctions without several people with high cultivation overseeing them.

Mo Tianliao stayed silent as he took out a long wooden box from his inventory bracelet, lifted the seal on the box with a hand, and gestured for the appraiser to go ahead.

The appraiser’s pupils contracted. This box was made from thousand-year-old Sinking Agarwood! What a waste!

He slowly opened the lid, finding the box to be full of wooden spikes. He picked one up. It was a simply crafted nine-inch wooden spike, with two rings carved at the end for grip. The tip was coated in dark iron. Even for something so simple, the workmanship was well done, as the extremely thin layer of dark iron blended so seamlessly into the wood that it was almost impossible to feel the seam where the two materials met.

The appraiser held one wooden spike between his fingers, infused it with spiritual energy, and threw it. The spike pierced through a thick stone

pillar and lodged firmly in the wall. No matter how he tried to pull it out, it wouldn’t budge.

“A high-grade magical artifact, comparable to a low-grade treasure artifact.” The appraiser took out all the wooden spikes and compared them individually. They were all identical, and precisely the same length.

“Fifty-eight spikes, single use only,” the appraiser stated, looking somewhat regretful. If this had been a magical artifact that could be controlled by the divine soul, it could be sold to cultivators who’d reached the core formation stage and above. With this many spikes, they could form a killing array, and the price could be at least ten times higher.

Mo Tianliao naturally understood this principle. However, to refine a treasure artifact, he’d have needed to add a luminous stone, a pricey material that wasn’t available on the back mountain. Besides, the Sinking Agarwood wasn’t some marvelous material, and refining it into a treasure artifact might not even be worth the cost.

“It can be retrieved and reused if you use it against a person.” Mo Tianliao took out nine spikes, leaving forty-nine of them. Cultivators were particular about following Heaven’s will, and as forty-nine was regarded as auspicious, it would be more marketable that way.

The appraiser nodded. “The estimated value is fifty medium-grade spiritual stones. You can consign it for sale.” Then, he took out a wooden token inscribed with the auction house’s emblem and split it in half. He embedded one half into the Sinking Agarwood box and gave the other half to Mo Tianliao, explaining that the auction would begin at noon the next day, and Mo Tianliao could enter with the wooden token instead of paying an admission fee. Once his item was sold, he could collect the spiritual

stones by presenting the token. The auction house would take a 10 percent commission.

“Urgh…” Mo Tianliao abruptly grunted as the furball under his cloak crawled to his neck and bit the back of it, startling him.

“Is there a problem?” The appraiser paused, thinking that Mo Tianliao was dissatisfied with the price. He couldn’t see Mo Tianliao’s face beneath the hood, so he ventured tentatively, “It’s your first time here, so 10 percent is quite reasonable. The rate can be renegotiated with repeated visits.”

Ten percent wasn’t low, but it was fair, so Mo Tianliao said nothing further and left the auction house, leaving the wooden box behind. Most auction houses valued their reputations and credibility, so Mo Tianliao wasn’t worried they would default on his payment.

He reached under the cloak, removed His Feline Lordship from his neck, and tucked him back into his outer robe. The annoyed cat promptly poked his head out of the collar, only to be covered again by the black cloak. Unable to see, he clawed at the cloak, ripping a hole in the fabric and exposing a pair of bright, gleaming eyes.

Mo Tianliao let him be and strolled around Auspicious Bazaar with his new cat eyes accessory.

Auspicious Bazaar was a small marketplace, but it still sold everything a cultivator could need. Mo Tianliao walked into a jade shop that sold a vast array of raw, uncut jade in varying sizes, along with intricately crafted jade jewelry. His gaze landed on a piece of bright and flawless light blue frost jade. Faint mist swirled around it, thanks to its inherent chill.

“This is superior frost jade that can preserve water-element spiritual herbs with no loss of spiritual energy,” the shopkeeper explained enthusiastically. “It would also make the perfect gift for your sweetheart, if you craft it into jewelry.” He displayed a hairpin carved from frost jade. It was pretty, despite the simple cloud design.

Mo Tianliao glanced disdainfully at the crudely made hairpin and picked up a piece of uncut jade. “Five medium-grade spiritual stones.”

“That won’t be enough!” The shopkeeper rejected him. Top-grade frost jade could be forged into spiritual artifacts, and a piece as big as this was worth at least ten medium-grade spiritual stones.

“Flawed frost jade can produce ice essence, but this flawless piece is only good for making jewelry. Five is already generous.” Mo Tianliao bargained mercilessly.

“Nonsense.” The shopkeeper rolled his eyes. “Even ten high-grade spiritual stones wouldn’t be enough to buy frost jades that can produce ice essence.” Uninformed buyers always assumed that flawless jade was better, but it was a different story for frost jades, where cracked pieces were worth more. They weren’t as pretty as this flawless piece, though.

Eventually, Mo Tianliao haggled the frost jade down to fifty-five low-grade spiritual stones.

He visited the other shops and bought a set of carving knives and some inexpensive raw materials for refining. By the time he was done, it was near dusk, so he found an inn to stay the night.

Cultivators weren’t particular about where they stayed. Had Mo Tianliao been alone, he could’ve just meditated anywhere, but since he had

his cat with him, staying at an inn would avoid unwanted attention and be safer.

The moment he entered the room, the cat leaped onto the bed and inspected the surroundings with his tail sticking straight up.

Mo Tianliao took off his cloak and took out the piece of frost jade to examine it.

Seeing this, the cat came over and looked at it over Mo Tianliao's arm. *This is just an ordinary piece of frost jade. Why did this fool buy it?* Then, he remembered the shopkeeper saying it could make pretty jewelry even if it couldn't be made into spiritual artifacts.

"Meow!" Displeased, the cat swatted the jade out of Mo Tianliao's hands.

Mo Tianliao caught it and tapped the furry head with a finger. "Behave yourself. I'm going to carve something good."

He took out his carving knives from his inventory bracelet and sized the jade up with the knife.

So he's really making jewelry! the cat thought. *Who is it for? Damn it. A female disciple from Woqing Sanctum, or an attendant from Qingning Palace?*

Mo Tianliao channeled spiritual energy into the blade and cut effortlessly through the jade. He worked quickly, first cutting a square and then hollowing it out like he was peeling an apple, before changing to a smaller blade to trim the edges.

The cat turned his back to him, refusing to admire his masterful skills.

“Done!” Mo Tianliao finished his work in no time. “Pawpaw, look!”

The furball ignored him.

Mo Tianliao poked him. The cat continued to ignore him.

He tugged at his tail. Still no response.

He lay down and brought his face close to the cat. “Paw~paw~”

Light-colored eyes slowly looked up. A moment later, the cat opened his mouth and bit him right on the nose.

“Yeowch!” Mo Tianliao rubbed his nose and ingratiatingly placed the carved jade in front of the rude little creature. “Look, Your Lordship, this is for you. Don’t be mad.”

Instead of the hideous hairpin he had imagined, the cat turned to find a small, smooth bowl. Perfectly engraved, the bowl was shallow and raised slightly in the center, so that the rim wouldn’t impede his whiskers during mealtime.

It was exactly the same as the bowl he’d had in Mo Tianliao’s former palace.

“Just make do with this for now. We’ll buy something better later.” Mo Tianliao petted the cat apologetically.

Cats couldn’t handle food that was too hot, and the same was true for cat spirit beasts. Using bowls made of frost jade cooled down the food without making it *too* cold, making it just perfect for meals. In the past, Mo Tianliao had dug out ice essence the size of a fist from a ten-thousand-year-old frost jade so he could use it to make an identical bowl for the cat in his former palace.

The cat looked at the tiny, light blue bowl, then at Mo Tianliao, who was watching him with a gentle gaze. He slowly pulled the jade bowl toward himself.

Hmph! Seeing how filial you are, I shall grudgingly accept it.

MINI EXTRA

You Don’t Understand the World of the Rich

Demonic Cultivator A: Oh, Venerable One. Here is ten-thousand-year-old ice essence.

Woodworker: Fantastic, I can make two ice needles and a cat bowl.

Demonic Cultivator B: Oh, Venerable One. This is top-quality cashmere.

Woodworker: I’ll use it for a pair of fireproof gloves and a cat bed.

Cultivators: We work our asses off for ten thousand gold, yet it can’t even compare to a tuft of fur from the demon palace.

Chapter 17:
Auction

ONCE HIS FELINE LORDSHIP was appeased, Mo Tianliao called for some dishes to be served.

Auspicious Bazaar only had one inn, so the food was mediocre and expensive. Pawpaw wasn't at all tempted by the fish; he pushed it around in his bowl for a bit before shoving it aside.

Mo Tianliao planned to buy him some fresh fish later, so he paid him no heed and finished eating his own meal. In his previous life, before he'd started cultivating, he'd come from a poor background; after his family's ruin, he'd often had to go hungry, and so unless the food was truly inedible, he usually cleaned his plate.

Pawpaw sat watching him, then lowered his head and dug into the deboned fish. He was no stranger to hunger himself, but since he'd been reunited with Mo Tianliao, he'd started being picky again without realizing it.

Mo Tianliao looked at the fluffy little guy nibbling on his fish and felt his heart ache a little. Back at his former palace, this fancy cat had dined only on spiritual fish raised in the waters of the Icesprings. "Don't force yourself. I'll buy you something else later."

The cat looked up at him, swished his tail, and decisively shoved the jade bowl aside.

Resigned, Mo Tianliao got up, told the cat to stay put, and stepped out. Something didn't feel right, though—he turned back and tucked the cat

into his robes, and then he left for the streets again.

The sun had set, and Auspicious Bazaar was illuminated by lanterns. Unlike the commoners' marketplace, the cultivators' marketplace rarely closed completely. After all, some treasures only revealed their true forms at night. The shops were closed, but the small stalls in the public squares at the center of the marketplace were open for business. Treasures of all sorts filled the bazaar, from crystal goblets to sheer starlight silk and luminescent cups, gleaming like the Milky Way when seen from afar.

Mo Tianliao bought a pack of fried fish and popped one into his mouth before feeding another to the furry little mouth hidden in the opening of his cloak.

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"THIS GLASS HAIRPIN is so pretty. Shixiong, let me put it on for you." A seductively attractive female cultivator held up a simple carved hairpin to the man behind her.

"I don't think it suits me." The burly man blushed at his junior's words. He looked like he wanted to accept it, but the crystal-clear glass hairpin would look really odd on him. He'd be a laughingstock among his fellow disciples if he wore it.

"I thought as much. Perhaps only that particular man could do this hairpin justice. He tied his hair up sometimes," the female cultivator muttered to herself. "I bet his hairpins are made of this kind of material. He did love light-colored glass…"

Displeased, the male cultivator grabbed the hairpin and tossed it back onto the stall. “How long has that man been dead now? Why do you keep thinking about him?”

“You—” The woman glared at him and was about to retort when she saw something that made her freeze.

“How much for this hairpin?” the newcomer said. He spoke casually, but his deep, pleasant voice resounded in the woman’s ears like a sudden thunderclap.

“Fifteen low-grade spiritual stones,” the stall owner—a cultivator—answered.

“The color and luster of the glass is good, but the crude workmanship ruins the material.” A slender hand reached out from the cloak to pick up the light-colored glass hairpin. The hairpin had a rudimentary design, a drifting cloud chasing the moon, carved with crude and rough strokes. “Five low-grade spiritual stones.”

“No can do. This piece cost me eight.” The cultivator wouldn’t budge.

“Then you might as well sell the glass itself. I’ll give you ten.”

The cultivator almost keeled over in rage.

“Venerable One…” the female cultivator blurted out, dazed.

The man in the cloak kept on haggling over the price as if he hadn’t heard her. Eventually, he got the hairpin for eight low-grade spiritual stones and left without looking back.

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MO TIANLIAO RETURNED to the inn, fiddling with the hairpin in his hand, and took out a tiny carving knife to improve the crude workmanship. If he wasn't mistaken, the woman he'd come across earlier had been one of his furnace tenders. He couldn't remember which demonic sect had sent her to him, but it seemed like she had returned there after his demon palace broke up. But this was Woyun Sect's territory; what was someone from a demonic sect doing here?

Mo Tianliao blew away the shavings from his carving work and turned to the cat licking his paw beside him. "Pawpaw, do you remember which sect sent me that female cultivator from earlier?"

The cat looked up at him, narrowed his eyes, and slashed at him with the full force of his spiritual energy. No doubt it would draw blood, and Mo Tianliao was so startled it scared his divine soul out of his arm.

Claws scraped against bark. Mo Tianliao looked down and saw that a small part of his arm had turned back into wood. The furry claws had torn through his sleeve, leaving four white streaks across the wood.

"Eh?" Mo Tianliao flexed his arm. His fingers could still move, and there was still sensation in the wooden part, although it was slightly duller than the parts made of flesh.

"Meow?" The cat's eyes widened. He pressed it with his pink paw pad—it was hard, and it even came with a layer of light green tree bark. He stood up on his back legs and started to scratch at Mo Tianliao's arm. This, he discovered, was fun. He clung on and went wild, clawing and scratching, gnawing and biting.

Mo Tianliao froze for a moment, then slowly drew his divine soul away from his fingers. They, too, gradually transformed into wood. When he restored his divine soul, they turned back to flesh and blood. His newfound ability to become inhuman at any time left him feeling rather conflicted. Picking up the furball who was still merrily using him as a scratching post, he lay down on the bed, closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

The night passed uneventfully.

The next day, Mo Tianliao put on his cloak and returned to the auction house.

Cultivators with consigned goods entered with their wooden tokens, while those who didn't had to fork out an admission fee of five low-grade spiritual stones.

Mo Tianliao kept his wooden token to himself, placed five spiritual stones on the tray at the entrance, and headed inside to find an inconspicuous corner to settle in. Those who presented wooden tokens were escorted by the attendants to designated private seats.

It didn't take long for the hall to fill up with people. The lights dimmed, and a foundation establishment-level cultivator walked onto the stage with an amicable smile.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for gracing Auspicious Auction House with your presence. We have some rare treasures to share with you here today…" The auctioneer briefly explained the process. The treasures were all placed on the stage, each one covered with a red cloth. They would be unveiled individually, and the highest bidder would win possession. The auction house had powerful cultivators overseeing the process, the

auctioneer reminded them, so they didn’t have to worry about anyone resorting to violence to get what they wanted.

Mo Tianliao scoffed. Nothing would happen inside the auction house, but outside? That was hard to say.

“The first treasure is a thousand-year Restoration Herb.” The cultivator on stage unveiled the first tray, revealing a greenish-yellow spiritual herb lying in a box made of frost jade. “Opening bid, four hundred and fifty low-grade spiritual stones.”

The Restoration Herb was a base ingredient for elixirs that could soothe the divine soul. A hundred-year herb could be made into a soul-soothing pill, a five-hundred-year herb into a soul-awakening pill, and a thousand-year one into soul-condensing pills. Soul-condensing pills were costly because they could calm agitated divine souls and repair damaged divine souls to some extent—and they were the only variety of pill that had this restorative effect.

Many elixirists bid on the herb the moment it appeared. Eventually, it went to someone for eighty medium-grade spiritual stones.

The first three items up for auction were all spiritual herbs and elixirs, which Mo Tianliao wasn’t interested in, so he took out his pack of fried fish and fed the cat under his cloak.

“The fourth item is a rare set of magical artifacts.” The auctioneer lifted the red cloth, unveiling the thousand-year Sinking Agarwood box, and opened it to reveal the wooden spikes inside. “Forty-nine wooden spikes made of Sinking Agarwood, with tips forged in dark iron. This is a set of exquisitely crafted high-grade magical artifacts. Opening bid is fifty medium-grade spiritual stones.”

“Wooden spikes made from Sinking Agarwood should be treasure artifacts. What’s the use of having them as magical artifacts?” muttered someone in the crowd. Having so many of these tiny objects was pointless if they couldn’t be controlled by the divine soul; just throwing them with your own hand wouldn’t do much damage.

As if expecting this, the auctioneer picked up a piece. “Why not see the power of this magical artifact first before leaping to conclusions?” An assistant brought out an adamantine rock about forty inches thick onto the stage. This sort of rock was exceedingly sturdy, on par with the toughness of a cultivator at the core formation stage.

The auctioneer channeled spiritual energy into the spike and threw it. It went right through the adamantine rock like a hot knife through butter.

The audience went into an uproar. Sinking Agarwood was known as a good choice for making concealed weapons, but this kind of effectiveness was unprecedented. So what if it wasn’t a treasure artifact? Throwing out a few of these during battle would puncture a few holes in their opponents’ bodies. Who could say—they might even turn the tide in their favor.

“Sixty!”

“Sixty-five!”

“Eighty!”

The bidding price quickly hit eighty, before slowing down as the bidders began to outbid each other one spiritual stone at a time.

“Ninety!” A female voice rang out with determination.

The crowd fell silent. This magical artifact was good, but it wasn’t worth spending over a hundred medium-grade spiritual stones.

“Ninety-five,” a voice said lazily from the corner.

The woman turned back and froze when she caught sight of a chin peeking out from under a black hood.

“A hundred!” the burly man beside her countered, unhappy that someone was fighting with his junior over the artifact.

“A hundred and one,” Mo Tianliao said leisurely as he fed the cat another fish.

“A hundred and five!” the burly man persisted.

Mo Tianliao continued gradually raising the price.

“A hundred and thirty!” After several counters, the man from the demonic sect shouted his highest offer and looked back smugly at the hooded figure, thinking he would counteroffer. After all, the price had already exceeded the artifact’s value, so the man must have been really desperate for it.

Mo Tianliao put away the fried fish, dusted his hands clean, and stopped bidding.

“Going once. Going twice. Sold!” The auctioneer on the stage was grinning from ear to ear. “Congratulations!”

The burly man’s jaw dropped as he looked at the wooden box being presented to him, then at his grateful-looking junior. He gritted his teeth and forked out the money.

“Our last treasure is extremely rare. If you win the bid, please remember to claim ownership here at our auction house.” The auctioneer paused dramatically. An item that required the winner to claim ownership would be either a spiritual artifact that could be nurtured in the dantian or

an incredibly valuable spirit beast—either was enough to drive the crowd into a frenzy.

The cat in Mo Tianliao's arms poked his head out of the tiny opening of the cloak. Mo Tianliao glanced around. The off-stage sitting area wasn't illuminated, so no one should be able to notice this tiny furry head. He let the cat be.

After building suspense, the auctioneer removed the red cloth, revealing an iron cage containing a terrified leopard cub. At the sudden exposure to bright light, it let out a weak cry.

"A spirit beast!"

"I'll pay whatever it takes!"

"Start the bidding now!"

The hall descended into chaos.

The cat tightened his paws on the cloak, ripping a large hole in the fabric.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: I'm no longer human. How depressing.

Pawpaw: It's all right. No matter what you become, you're still the same in my heart.

Woodworker: *touched* What am I in your heart?

Pawpaw: A scratching post.

Woodworker: …That really doesn't make me feel better.

Chapter 18:
On a Narrow Path

SNOWY FUR PEEKED through the new hole in the cloak. Mo Tianliao quickly stuffed His Feline Lordship back into his robes and patted him soothingly.

The leopard cub in the cage was indeed a spirit beast with spiritual intelligence. Even though its aptitude was average, the crowd still whipped themselves into a bidding frenzy over it. The opening bid was five hundred high-grade spiritual stones.

In other words, five thousand medium-grade spiritual stones or fifty thousand low-grade spiritual stones.

Spirit beasts had always commanded such sky-high prices that most cultivators could never afford to buy one in their entire lifetime. The duo from the demonic sect kept raising the bid in their excitement—there was no sign of the heartache they'd shown over forking out money for the magical artifact earlier.

Mo Tianliao said nothing and quickly left the hall.

Once someone won the bid, they'd have to establish ownership on the spot to prevent anyone else from snatching the spirit beast away when they left the auction. The signing of a blood pact had a great impact on spirit beasts; Mo Tianliao wanted to leave quickly in case it made Pawpaw uncomfortable.

With the audience's attention on the spirit beast, no one noticed him as he turned and moved to the back of the room. The core formation

appraiser glanced in his direction and smiled knowingly.

According to the auction rules, those with wooden tokens sitting in the private area weren't allowed to participate in bidding for their own consigned item. Mo Tianliao's attempt to muddy the waters and drive up the price would never have been permitted at a major auction house, but small ones like Auspicious Auction House were happy to turn a blind eye.

He received a hundred and twenty-seven medium-grade spiritual stones—which was finally enough to cover Pawpaw's medical consultation fee.

By the time Mo Tianliao left the auction house, the bidding was over. He glanced back and frowned. The buyer, dressed in azure robes, was from Qingyun Sect.

"Rowr—!" The leopard cub squeaked in terror and spat fire at the cultivator dragging him out of the cage, but another cultivator held him down and cut the cub's forehead with a dagger to extract a drop of blood essence.

The cat peered out of Mo Tianliao's collar, trembling very slightly. Assuming he was frightened, Mo Tianliao hurried out to make inquiries at the elixir shop. The shopkeeper informed him that their elixirist was checking the medicinal herbs in their storehouse about one and a half miles away from the marketplace, and he could head there directly to seek treatment.

Once he was on a mountain path outside Auspicious Bazaar, Mo Tianliao removed his cloak and freed His Stifled Feline Lordship.

The white fluffball was listless as he clung motionlessly and silently to his collar.

“What’s wrong?” Mo Tianliao held the cat up to his face.

Light glass eyes looked at him, appearing somewhat cold yet indescribably aggrieved.

“What’s wrong, precious?” Mo Tianliao placed the cat against his neck and stroked his back like he was comforting a child.

“Mew…” The cat tried to wrap his paws around Mo Tianliao’s neck, but alas, his forelegs were too short to make it all the way around. His little pink nose sniffed Mo Tianliao’s neck over and over again. The faint scent of grass and wood dispelled the stench of blood lingering in his nose, making him feel a little better.

Mo Tianliao sighed. He regretted not leaving sooner. Seeing them cut that poor leopard cub with a dagger must have frightened Pawpaw.

After a while, the cat perked up again and looked up to find concern in Mo Tianliao’s eyes. Retracting his claws, he patted Mo Tianliao’s chin softly with the pad of his paw. *I know. That’s how everyone treats spirit beasts. I was just lamenting it for a moment. Let’s go now.*

Mo Tianliao kissed that warm paw. “Don’t be afraid. I’ll never force you to sign a blood pact.”

That’s not what I’m talking about! His Feline Lordship narrowed his eyes and swatted him in the face. *Do I look that timid to you?!*

The two of them finally arrived at the storehouse—a small bamboo courtyard. Low-level cultivators occasionally came here to trade spiritual herbs they’d picked in the mountains, while elixirist disciples at the qi-refining stage examined the herbs. After hearing Mo Tianliao’s reason for coming, they led him to the back.

This particular marketplace at the foot of the mountain only had the one foundation establishment elixirist. There were a number of high-level elixirists in the sect, but Mo Tianliao didn't dare to expose Pawpaw's existence there, so he had to find one down the mountain instead.

"Meow!" The cat scratched the elixirist trying to take his pulse. *How dare you touch my hand?!*

The elixirist was left with no choice: He had to use the silver-threaded gloves meant for examining the elixir furnace. He spent quite a while examining Pawpaw, but he couldn't make a diagnosis. "Your kitten's fine, but it's a little small. I have some excellent pills for beasts here. Would you like to buy some for it?" He tipped out several ochre-colored pills from a gourd and placed them before the small cat.

The cat glanced at those ugly, stinky things and swatted them under the table, then shook his paw in disdain.

"What a waste!" A parrot—the elixirist's soul beast—flew over and ate the pills from the floor. Elixir concoction was as lucrative a business as forging artifacts, but an elixirist at the foundation establishment stage probably couldn't afford a spirit beast. It was likely he'd caught this one himself.

Compared to that unappetizing pill, the colorful parrot proved to be more appealing to the cat. The little furball pounced on the parrot and chomped down on its neck.

"Murder! Murder!" the parrot shrieked.

Mo Tianliao quickly picked up the cat. "Spit it out!"

The elixirist, who'd been about to reach out to save his bird, pulled his hand back. Pleased with this customer's manners, he decided he'd

charge only twenty-five spiritual stones for the consultation.

“Spit it out now! Or the feathers might get stuck in your nose and make you feel terrible.” Mo Tianliao plucked the bird out of the cat’s mouth and tossed it to the side, focused solely on his cat.

The elixirist speechlessly picked up his discarded parrot and decided to charge him forty.

“Noooo, I’m bald!” the parrot squawked sorrowfully, looking down at his newly plucked neck.

In the end, Mo Tianliao paid a hefty consultation fee for learning practically nothing. On the way back to the sect, Mo Tianliao looked at the yawning cat and frowned. “Pawpaw, will you let me see your divine soul?” He held him up and pressed his forehead against the cat’s.

“Meow!” The cat turned his head away, refusing contact.

“Come on. Show me!” Mo Tianliao was getting anxious. If Pawpaw was physically fine, the only explanation for his sleepiness was that his divine soul was damaged.

Getting agitated, the cat scratched him, leaped to the ground, and fled.

Mo Tianliao chased after him. The mountain forest was dense; it would be extremely difficult to find such a tiny little ball of fluff if he hid among the trees. Besides, this wasn’t the back mountain of Woqing Sanctum. Here, danger lurked everywhere.

“Look what we have here!” said a snide voice. “A qi-refining cultivator with a soul beast!” A burly hand grabbed the furball.

Mo Tianliao jumped and looked up to find the demonic sect duo he'd seen earlier at the marketplace.

"My lord!" the woman exclaimed in surprise when she saw Mo Tianliao's face.

"Meow!" The cat, furious at being caught, pushed at his assailant with all four paws. When that didn't work, he spat a mouthful of icy mist at the man's eyes.

"Ow!" The bone-chilling icy mist turned to countless ice blades that slashed at the man's face. "Shimei, this isn't a soul beast, it's a spirit beast!"

The cultivation of a soul beast bound by a blood pact was limited to its owner's cultivation. If their master was at the qi-refining stage, the soul beast could only unleash its powers up to the qi-refining stage. But that attack just now had far surpassed the qi-refining stage.

Mo Tianliao caught the cat as it leaped into his arms and glared coldly at the duo.

"How are you related to the Venerable Lord Duantian?" The woman summoned forth the magical artifact she'd won in the auction earlier. She clearly wasn't planning to let them leave unless she received an acceptable answer.

Mo Tianliao narrowed his eyes as he stroked the little creature in his arms, deciding there and then that these two people had to die.

MINI EXTRA

Burly Man: No blood pact! Mine, mine, mine!

Female Cultivator: He looks like the Venerable One! Grab, grab, grab!

Woodworker: How dare you touch my cat! Die, die, die!

Chapter 19:
Battle

MOVING SWIFTLY, Mo Tianliao tossed the cat onto a nearby treetop and preemptively hurled nine wooden spikes to break the woman's protective barrier before she could deploy any magical artifacts.

Startled, the woman couldn't react in time. The man quickly pulled her aside to dodge the attack, and nine wooden spikes struck the ground where they had been standing earlier. Before they could regain their footing, Mo Tianliao threw a round wooden orb which gave off black smoke at them.

The burly man summoned his blade and cleaved the orb in two—only for two large vats' worth of oil to gush forth and douse them both. The orb had a spatial array spell engraved in it!

Mo Tianliao had refined this oil from the oilseed trees on the back mountain. It was a highly flammable natural odor neutralizer, making it ideal for grilling mutton.

"Oh no!" the woman shrieked. She was all too familiar with this move. No doubt their opponent would follow this up with an even more vicious one. She quickly formed a hand seal to create a water barrier.

Sure enough, before she could even complete the seal, a fireball formed from spiritual energy hurtled toward them—but it fizzled out quickly when it hit the water barrier. This woman had a dual attribute of water and fire, and a physical constitution that made her an ideal vessel for cultivation. She had once been a plaything given to Mo Tianliao by one of

the demonic sects, but she ended up being used by Mo Tianliao as a fire stoker and water sprinkler for many years. Vessels like her progressed slowly in their cultivation, but after three hundred years, she had reached the peak of the foundation establishment stage—her spiritual energy-infused water could put out the fireball formed out of Mo Tianliao's fire spiritual energy easily enough.

There was a considerable gap between the spiritual energy of those at the foundation establishment stage and those at the qi-refining stage. Theoretically speaking, Mo Tianliao fighting these two was like a mantis trying to stop a chariot with its arms. But with his divine soul, he could still use certain high-level spells. He just wouldn't have much spiritual energy to draw on, although killing people beyond his current level was still within his means.

He threw three more small fireballs at them, but the duo successfully avoided them. Then, the burly man charged at Mo Tianliao while infusing his broadsword with earth-element spiritual energy. At his level, he wasn't afraid of a mere qi-refining cultivator.

Mo Tianliao stepped aside to dodge the blow, and the broadsword slammed heavily into the ground, splitting it open and sending up a billowing cloud of sand that surged toward him.

Mo Tianliao sprang up, but he didn't have enough spiritual energy to stay in the air, so when the fissure reached his feet, he rolled clumsily on the ground and used the momentum to kick a small orb into the fissure.

The burly man let out a mocking laugh at this sorry attempt at acrobatics, but just as he was about to deliver a fatal blow, countless iron

pellets shot forth with such tremendous force that they pierced through his protective shields and buried themselves in his flesh.

The burly man screamed in pain as his spiritual energy surged violently, and he stomped heavily on the ground, cracking the earth beneath him. The two halves of the first orb sank into the cracks and the earth-element spiritual energy shattered them, destroying the spatial array within and unleashing an explosion of the iron pellets compressed inside.

A shower of iron pellets rained down upon them.

Seeing the situation deteriorating, the female cultivator hiding off to the side pulled out the jade hairpin in her hair and transformed it into a longsword. She drew two half circles with the sword to create two towering water pillars, sending one toward Mo Tianliao and the other at her senior.

The water slowed the momentum of the iron pellets and cleared them to the side. Meanwhile, Mo Tianliao tapped the ground with his feet and summoned the closest tree with his wood-element spiritual energy. It rose from the earth and lifted him up to evade the water.

The burly man was now both enraged and bleeding from multiple pellet wounds. “The wooden spikes!” he shouted to remind his junior to use her newly purchased magical artifacts.

Remembering those spikes she’d drawn but not used earlier, the woman flung them at Mo Tianliao. Propelled by water-element spiritual energy, the spikes were an unstoppable force.

Mo Tianliao first formed a hand seal and drew a talisman that reduced the fire-element spiritual energy in the wooden spikes. Then, he spun in the air and caught two of them with his bare hands. The force of the power drove him back a few steps, but he steadied himself and, without so

much as a pause, hurled the spikes back—now enveloped in a layer of green flame.

The two demonic cultivators caught the spikes with their hands without thinking much of it—they'd forgotten all about the oil on their clothes. The fabric and their hair instantly caught fire. The woman quickly summoned the stream water nearby with a water-element spell to put out the fire, only to realize to her horror that water couldn't put out these flames.

Mo Tianliao caught his breath and frowned. Two more auras had appeared in the vicinity. Instead of pressing the attack, he quickly retreated to the tree Pawpaw was hiding in. If something felt off to him, he'd make a run for it with his cat.

The woman burned for a long time before she realized that water formed from spiritual energy could be used to extinguish the fire. She quickly extinguished the fire on both of them. However, forming water out of pure spiritual energy was extremely draining. The fire died down, but the woman's face had gone deathly pale.

Just then, a flying sword shot out of nowhere and pierced through the woman's back.

The woman's eyes widened and she looked back in disbelief. Two cultivators in azure robes stepped out. One raised his hand, and the flying sword returned to him. Blood gushed from her chest, and she collapsed to the ground.

"Shimei!" the burly man howled.

Mo Tianliao's eyes narrowed at the sight of these two cultivators from Qingyun Sect. They had been lying in ambush for a quarter of an hour,

clearly intending to wait for the two sides to weaken each other before they stepped in to collect the spoils. “My fellow cultivators!” Mo Tianliao shouted out to them promptly. “I’m the personal disciple of Qingtong-zhenren of Woyun Sect. Many thanks for your help!”

As Mo Tianliao expected, the burly man charged at the two Qingyun Sect disciples as soon as those words were out of Mo Tianliao’s mouth. Mo Tianliao leaned against the trunk, quietly regulating his breathing to recover his spiritual energy.

“Meow…” The cat climbed down from the tree and jumped onto his shoulder.

Mo Tianliao turned his head to nuzzle his cheek against the furry little body.

One of the two cultivators in azure was only at the qi-refining stage, so he stood aside to watch the show. The other, however, could command a treasure artifact flying sword, which meant he had a divine soul—a core formation cultivator!

Frowning in thought, Mo Tianliao contemplated his escape plan for when the battle ended.

While core formation and foundation establishment were only one stage apart, there was a whole world of difference separating a high-level cultivator from a low-level one. The power gap was huge. Those like Mo Tianliao, who could kill beyond their level, were few and far between. Most foundation establishment cultivators would be an embarrassingly easy kill for a core formation cultivator.

The qi-refining cultivator standing idly to the side finally noticed the cat on Mo Tianliao’s shoulder. His eyes lit up, and he signaled to the core

formation cultivator with his eyes.

“The appearance of these two demonic cultivators in this place is suspicious, and now they’ve died in Woyun Sect’s territory. That does seem to be a problem, doesn’t it?” the core formation cultivator asked hypocritically, putting away his sword.

Mo Tianliao didn’t reply, tucking the cat in his robe. Then he picked up the box of wooden spikes, opened it, and made a show of counting them. “All the magical artifacts and treasures those two were carrying are yours now. I still have something else to attend to, so I shall take my leave.”

“Hey! Wait!” The qi-refining cultivator blocked Mo Tianliao’s way. “I saw a white cat in your arms earlier. May I take a look at it?”

He had just signed a blood pact with the spirit leopard, so his sensitivity toward spirit beasts was still heightened. He could faintly sense that the cat was a spirit beast without a blood pact.

They had originally come here to pay an official visit to Woyun Sect. When they’d heard Mo Tianliao say he was an inner disciple earlier, they’d considered making his acquaintance and having him take them there. But that had all changed when they saw Pawpaw. A spirit beast was so valuable that even if this *was* Woyun Sect’s territory, killing this cultivator to snatch his spirit beast would be well worth the price.

“Uh…” Mo Tianliao took a step back. “Absolutely not!” As he was still speaking, he shot over forty wooden spikes imbued with a wisp of woodfire toward the core formation cultivator. At the same time, he lunged at the qi-refining cultivator with a flaming fist and knocked him over with a punch.

The core formation cultivator dodged the spikes and sprang into the air, reaching for Mo Tianliao's chest with a clawlike grasp. Mo Tianliao tossed the cat in the air and prepared to directly receive the blow, but the cultivator suddenly switched direction, grabbed the cat, and started to run away.

A sudden burst of white light flared, and the three of them instinctively shut their eyes. The next moment, the core formation cultivator violently coughed out blood and collapsed heavily to the ground.

Oblivious to what had just happened, Mo Tianliao turned around to see a man in flowing white robes standing gracefully in midair, his spiritual energy surging abundantly around him. With a face like sculpted jade and eyes like glass orbs, he was so impossibly beautiful it was otherworldly.

Shizun!

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Leaving the tutorial village only to immediately face annihilation. Can it get any worse?!

Demonic Cultivator: Bullying a newbie only for him to turn out to be an old geezer. Can it get any worse?!

Core Formation Cultivator: Robbing someone only to encounter their shizun. Can it get any worse?!

Shizun: How dare you bully my scratching post! Die, die, die!

Chapter 20:
Eradicate the Root of the Problem

"Q-QINGTONG-ZHENREN..." The core formation cultivator's face went ashen with fear as he hurriedly backed away.

The spiritual energy on Taixuan was becoming increasingly impure these days, making it hard to cultivate to higher levels even with the help of a soul beast. Even a nascent soul cultivator could become a sect elder. But this Woyun Sect sanctum-master was an undisputed soul transformation cultivator.

Core formation was considered high-level, but a cultivator at that stage was still a miserable ant in the face of a great master at the soul transformation stage.

The qi-refining cultivator was scared senseless too. He had seen Qingtong when he participated in the sects' grand meet, and he knew that this elder had a terrible temper.

"Raaaaah…" The stumbling leopard cub had finally caught up with them, and he let out an emotional howl at the sight of the gorgeous man in midair.

The cub's cry snapped everyone back to their senses. The qi-refining cultivator took a deep breath and cupped his hands to Qingtong. "Greetings, Qingtong-zhenren. My name is He Xijiu, the grandson of Elder Yunsong of Qingyun Sect. I'm here at my grandfather's behest to pay Woyun Sect a visit."

There was an unwritten rule in the orthodox sects: Cultivators under the protection of elders or masters could report their protector's name when they were in danger, and fellow orthodox cultivators would typically show them leniency or give way. If they insisted on killing them anyway, they would make an enemy of the dead cultivator's protector. This was the reason Mo Tianliao had declared his own identity earlier.

Such was the hypocrisy of the orthodox sects, and it had bred a bunch of pampered young masters. Mo Tianliao sneered. The demonic path was about survival of the fittest, where actual power reigned supreme. People who lacked skills and the ability to read the room never lived long.

Qingtong descended to the ground, his icy gaze falling upon a grime-covered Mo Tianliao. "Come here."

Mo Tianliao brushed the dirt off himself and walked over to bow in greeting. "Shizun." His eyes, however, were searching frantically around for his missing cat.

"So he's *your* disciple! It's all a misunderstanding. We were just curious when we saw him with an unclaimed spirit beast…" Regaining his composure, the core formation cultivator smiled and wiped away the blood from the corner of his mouth.

With just a few words, he reframed their murder and cat-napping attempt as a misunderstanding, completely denying any prior knowledge of Mo Tianliao's identity. At the same time, he was tattling on Mo Tianliao: *Look, your disciple got himself a spirit beast behind your back; maybe he even stole it from your sect!*

Qingtong glanced impassively down at the chattering cultivator and raised his hand to reveal a tuft of snowy-white fur inside his sleeve. That

made it clear—the spirit beast wasn't Mo Tianliao's, but Qingtong's. The cultivator promptly shut up.

Mo Tianliao heaved a sigh of relief. His cat was safe with his master, but… He stared at that fair, slender hand and at the fur right next to it—his cat was close with someone else?! Did his master have his eyes on Pawpaw too? Did he want to take him for himself?

"So, which one will it be? Will you end yourselves, or shall I do it?" Qingtong asked in that clear, melodious voice of his, moving that hand behind his back.

He Xijiu froze. He'd reported his grandfather's name, and Qingtong still wanted to kill them?!

"Xijiu is the only grandson of my master, the Patriarch Yunsong. We were at fault for offending your disciple earlier. Pleasearghhh—" Before he could finish, Qingtong swung his hand—a massive phantom palm materialized in sync with its movement and slapped him with such force it sent him flying hard into the cliff wall.

"Tedious." Qingtong shook his hand in disdain.

Mo Tianliao gulped, deciding to keep his conversations with his master brief in the future, or he just might get slapped against a wall. That looked really painful.

"Please spare me! I've realized the error of my ways. I-I can offer these treasures to you." Realizing Qingtong had no intent to respect Elder Yunsong, He Xijiu shakily dumped out all the items in his inventory pendant. In his panic, he even tossed over the leopard cub.

"Oh?" Qingtong hummed, his long lashes fluttering as his gaze shifted to the curled-up, trembling cub. "Very well, then. But it has already

signed a pact."

Hearing this, He Xijiu slapped himself lightly. "Whoops, I completely forgot." Soul beasts that had signed a blood pact couldn't sign another with someone else, and if their masters died, the soul beasts would die along with them. This was why Mo Tianliao was glad he hadn't signed a blood pact with Pawpaw.

Qingtong suddenly grabbed He Xijiu by the neck and locked eyes with him.

He Xijiu screamed, and the leopard cub's eyes began to roll back.

With his powerful soul, Mo Tianliao could see a wisp of bloodred mist flying out from the center of He Xijiu's forehead and into the leopard cub's body.

Qingtong released his grip, and He Xijiu slumped to the ground, unconscious. The leopard cub lay on the ground with a weak mew before closing his eyes.

Qingtong pointed to the sad ball of drab fur. "Bring it with us."

Mo Tianliao hurried forward and scooped up the leopard cub. The little one was limp, and his divine soul was unstable. Pressing his forehead against the cub's, Mo Tianliao sensed that the tenuous divine soul connection between the cub and He Xijiu had been severed. It was free again!

Had the blood pact really been severed?

Mo Tianliao was shocked. Three centuries ago, he had, in his boredom, thought of researching a spiritual treasure that could sever a blood pact. Theoretically, it was feasible, but a blood pact was essentially a partial exchange of divine souls between spirit beast and human. To sever the

connection, one would have to cut off a part of one party's soul—it would essentially give that person brain damage. He had only made a prototype back then and never managed to refine it. Who would have thought that a spell that could sever blood pacts would exist three hundred years later?

A slap to the back of his head snapped him out of his thoughts. Mo Tianliao looked up to see his master looking at him with a hint of disdain in those beautiful crystal eyes.

"Shizun?"

"So messy," he said in that clear, melodious voice. Then he flicked his finger, and an ice blade shot over to impale the core formation cultivator who had just peeled himself off the cliff wall.

Mo Tianliao's eyes curved slightly in appreciation for Qingtong's swift and decisive action. He detested the so-called righteousness and benevolence that the orthodox sects preached. They demanded other people play fair, but apparently that didn't apply to them when they wanted to kill someone else for their treasures. If his master had arrived a moment later, he'd have been the one robbed of his spirit beast and impaled.

Mo Tianliao looked at He Xijiu, presumably effectively lobotomized, and decisively grabbed the burly demonic cultivator's broadsword to end his life. Letting him live would only fuel Elder Yunsong's hatred further. He might as well eliminate the problem entirely.

Dusting off his hands, he hoisted the leopard cub and followed after his master. "Shizun, wait for me!"

"Give it to the sect leader." Qingtong stopped and glanced at the leopard cub in Mo Tianliao's hands. "Then come see me in Qingning Palace."

The sect leader? Mo Tianliao frowned. “If the sect leader asks…”

“Tell him the truth.” With that, he transformed into a brilliant streak of light and vanished over the horizon.

“Shizun…” Mo Tianliao thought about how far he’d have to walk to get back to the mountain. At least give him a lift back, or it’d be sunset by the time he got home!

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IN MIDAIR, Qingtong took out a white-jade bottle, tipped a heaven-grade soul-condensing pill onto his palm, and quickly swallowed it.

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BY THE TIME Mo Tianliao returned to the sect, it was dusk.

“Hold on, you’re saying Qingtong severed this leopard cub’s blood pact?” Sect Leader Tianlang-zhenren stroked the unconscious cub, pondering this news.

“That’s right,” Mo Tianliao answered honestly, following his master’s instruction to explain everything. However, he omitted the part about him selling magical artifacts and explained Pawpaw away as a cat he’d met on the back mountain, claiming not to know he was a spirit beast. He was new to the sect, so it was only to be expected that he wouldn’t recognize one—especially when he had such an unreliable master.

The sect leader said nothing. He dismissed Mo Tianliao and told him to leave the leopard cub behind.

Yanlie walked in and beamed as he poked at the dirty little guy. “Shizun, shouldn’t this leopard cub go to Woqing Sanctum?”

“Does Qingtong even have the time to bother with him? You can have him.” Stroking his beard, Tianlang-zhenren passed the leopard cub to Yanlie. “And clean up the mess from the fight.”

Mindful of his status as the chief disciple who was supposed to relieve the sect leader’s burdens, Yanlie swallowed back the *why me again* on the tip of his tongue and smiled in agreement.

***

REMEMBERING HIS MASTER’S instruction to go to Qingning Palace, and thinking back to the disdain in Qingtong’s eyes when he looked at the leopard cub, Mo Tianliao showered and changed into clean clothes before he headed to the main hall.

Qingning Palace stood against the night sky with its glass lamps ablaze. From the distance, it looked like a crystal palace. As he walked into the grand hall, a maidservant in white gestured for him to remain quiet. His master, who was supposed to be sitting on the couch waiting for him, was resting on a large pillow with his eyes closed, sleeping soundly.

“You’ve come at the right time.” The maidservant pointed at the doors to the inner chamber. “I don’t dare to wake him up, but the hall is too

cold.” What she meant was: *Please wake him up and get him to return to his room to sleep.*

Taking in the sight of the unconscious man on the couch, and then the pleading expression in the maidservant’s eyes, Mo Tianliao walked over to Qingtong and crouched down. Light from the glass lamps shone upon that handsome face that looked like it was sculpted from jade, illuminating each distinct eyelash and casting a slight shadow over them.

Gently, he wrapped his arms around the sleeping beauty and picked up his master in a princess carry, much to the maidservant’s shock.

Cultivators had keen senses, and Mo Tianliao had initially just intended to hug him, fully prepared for his master to jolt awake and beat him up. But that didn’t happen. His master remained asleep. He leaned against Mo Tianliao’s chest like it was the most natural thing in the world and snuggled against it. Mo Tianliao’s heart skipped a beat.

“Remember, he’s your shizun,” he muttered to himself. He swallowed hard and made his way to the inner chamber.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Remember, he’s your shizun.

Shizun: What’s that about Shizun?

Woodworker: Think no evil, think no evil.

Shizun: *nuzzling against Woodworker’s face* Meow~

Woodworker: *nosebleed* I should have become a monk instead of a cultivator! QAQ

Chapter 21:
Cultivation

THE LIGHT in the inner chamber was so dim that Mo Tianliao could barely see the furnishings. The spacious room was carpeted with light-colored cushions, making it unsteady to walk on. Mo Tianliao almost tripped as he walked inside, but he caught and steadied himself just in time. He looked down. The beautiful man in his arms was still sound asleep.

Silently breathing a sigh of relief, Mo Tianliao looked around. There was a large, partially open window, with sheer curtains that fluttered gently in the night breeze. A huge canopied bed stood in the center, its white brocade bedding faintly glowing in the moonlight.

He walked over and gently placed the sleeping beauty on the bed. The soft breath against his neck was giving him troubling feelings. Mo Tianliao took a deep breath and hardened his heart, forcing himself to transfer the head resting against his chest to the soft pillow.

Cold moonlight filtered through the sheer curtains, illuminating a face so incomparably handsome that Mo Tianliao couldn’t help but take another look, his eyes trailing along the exquisite curves of his closed eyes, his thin, pale-colored lips, his perfectly contoured chin, his fair neck, and down below his collarbone—

Think no evil!

Mo Tianliao forcefully tore his gaze away from his tempting master and released his arms. The soft bedding quickly folded the slender man into

its embrace. Mo Tianliao pulled over a thin quilt and covered Qingtong with it, but as he turned to leave, he felt a tug on his sleeve.

“Where are you going?” a clear, charming voice asked in a groggy tone.

Mo Tianliao stiffly turned back toward his master, who had grabbed the end of his sleeve and was slowly opening his beautiful eyes. He lit the glass lamp by the bed and crouched at eye level with his master. “I’ll come back tomorrow if you’re tired.”

Qingtong yawned, covering his mouth with his fair hand, and lay there looking back at him. “You don’t have to come tomorrow. I’ll be in seclusion.”

Mo Tianliao understood this to mean that he should spit out whatever he had to say now and then make himself scarce, so he quickly brought up Pawpaw. “I’d really like to have that white cat.”

Mo Tianliao had already confirmed with Yanlie that there was no actual rule to provide a personal disciple with a spirit beast. It all depended on whether their master was inclined to give them one or not. He couldn’t lose Pawpaw, and he wasn’t worried Pawpaw would refuse to go with him. His only worry, he admitted to his master, was that he might give the cat away to someone else.

“That won’t happen,” Qingtong said, and dismissed him with a wave.

Mo Tianliao felt a weight lift off his heart at his master’s answer. Seeing his sleepy eyes misting over like rain-washed obsidians, he couldn’t help but ask another question as an excuse to keep looking at them. “Then how can I get that cat?”

Those shimmering eyes glanced at him briefly before closing. “Depends on your performance.”

Mo Tianliao broke into a grin and took out a glass hairpin—the same one he’d bought at the marketplace. However, he had recarved it into the “drifting cloud chasing the moon” design worn by men, with a hidden moon inlaid within the hollow cloud. The simple exterior also had intricate patterns that glistened in the candlelight. It was gorgeous.

“I bought this from the marketplace,” he said in a soft, lulling voice. “I’d like to give it to you.” Not caring if his master heard him, he placed the hairpin by the pillow and blew out the light. “I’m leaving now.”

The doors to the inner chamber closed, and the light from the crack underneath disappeared. A still silence descended in the room.

Those closed eyes opened again. Qingtong took the hairpin and brought it closer to get a look, his night vision taking in every carved detail.

Pawpaw, your eyes are so beautiful; they look like light-colored glass.

Look, Pawpaw, don’t we look like a couple when I wear a light-colored glass hairpin?

I’ve got too much of an intimidating vibe for glass; this kind of glass is better suited to a gorgeous knockout.

Those pale lips curved into a barely perceptible smile as Qingtong put the hairpin under his pillow and wearily closed his eyes.

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MO TIANLIAO DIDN'T SEE the little cat on his bed when he opened his eyes the next day. Surprised, he got up and went looking for him.

A few second-generation disciples-in-charge came to report matters and found Mo Tianliao wandering around the courtyard. "What are you looking for?" they asked.

"Nothing." Mo Tianliao looked up and waved them in.

Once the complicated routine affairs were settled, Mo Tianliao tapped two fingers on the table. "It's bad enough that you manage all these tedious tasks every day with no compensation, but it holds you back from cultivating, which is even worse. I've discussed it with Shizun, and we'll be setting up a Chamber of Administrative Affairs in Woqing Sanctum."

Establishing a Chamber of Administrative Affairs wouldn't be hard: The sect already had one, so they only needed to replicate that on a smaller scale. Disciples with high cultivation and good moral character could be placed on rotating duty for the positions, and they would receive an additional spiritual stone allowance during their shifts.

Mo Tianliao's workload lightened considerably once the Chamber of Administrative Affairs had been established. The disciples only bothered him occasionally when they couldn't decide on something. With his new free time, Mo Tianliao devoted himself to cultivation.

Advancement was assured now that he had ample spiritual stones. Under the guidance of *The Art of Burning Wood*, Mo Tianliao chopped down every type of spiritual tree on the back mountain.

With an abundance of wood-element spiritual energy around him and the fire-element spiritual energy that was released whenever he burned

wood, Mo Tianliao's cultivation advanced rapidly. However… Mo Tianliao looked at the delicious-smelling grilled coldspring fish before him and sighed.

There was rarely any sign of Pawpaw these days, and Mo Tianliao couldn't finish all the food that *The Art of Burning Wood* required him to grill. And the coldspring fish featured in this chapter was the little furball's favorite.

Mo Tianliao didn't care for fish, but it would be a shame to waste this valuable coldspring fish after all the effort he'd put into catching it…so he wrapped it up with a clean leaf and made his way to Qingning Palace. If the cat wasn't on the back mountain, perhaps he was with his master.

Before Qingning Palace's main hall was a bamboo grove elegantly decorated with a bamboo couch, a rocking chair lined with cushions, a weiqi board, and the like. The beautiful man in white lay with his eyes shut on the rocking chair, surrounded by the refreshing fragrance of bamboo. Pleasant sunlight filtered through the slender bamboo stalks, shining cozily and warmly on his clothes.

This was the idyllic sight that greeted Mo Tianliao when he approached—his master narrowing his eyes and enjoying the warm afternoon sun that washed his white robe in gold. It made him look less detached and more…alluring.

Entranced, Mo Tianliao walked over with the grilled fish in hand.

Long lashes fluttered open, and cold eyes swept over him. "What is it?" Qingtong asked.

"I grilled a coldspring fish and thought of—" Seeing those beautiful eyes light up at the mention of fish, Mo Tianliao swallowed down the words

feeding the cat and instead finished, “—asking Shizun to try it.”

Qingtong scoffed. “I’m long past the need for food.”

Mo Tianliao smiled and sat on a small bamboo stool beside the rocking chair. “That doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy good food. Even after I attained inedia in my previous life, I still kept up with my meals. After all, the path of cultivation is so long. How boring would it be to even give up good food?”

He unwrapped the leaf as he spoke, revealing the aromatic grilled fish within.

The meat of a coldspring fish was fresh and tender. When grilled over wood imbued with an abundance of spiritual energy, it only needed a light brush of seasoning to be deliciously ready for eating.

Qingtong glanced at the appetizing fish and picked up a piece to try. “How’s your cultivation coming along?”

“I’m already at level eight of the qi-refining stage,” Mo Tianliao answered honestly. “In a few days, I’ll be able to break through to the foundation establishment stage.”

“Good.” Qingtong swallowed a piece of fish and lifted his chin slightly.

Mo Tianliao followed his gaze to the tea set on the table. Understanding dawned on him, and he set the fish down within his master’s reach and pulled the tea table over. The orthodox sects were all about devotion and single-mindedness when it came to cultivation; cultivation was their only interest. It was a different story for demonic cultivators, who followed their hearts.

The days were long when you followed the path of cultivation. Other than artifact forging, Mo Tianliao had also studied many other things, such as the tea ceremony. In his view, every sip and bite was cultivation. Increasing spiritual power was important, of course, but tempering one's mind was just as essential.

Wash, brew, steep, skim, and smell—his movements were smooth and pleasing to watch as he poured the fragrant tea into the white-jade cup and handed it to his master.

A hand took the cup, so fair it was hard to tell where the hand ended and the cup began. But as soon as the rim of the cup touched those lips, it pulled away.

Qingtong glared at Mo Tianliao. *Are you trying to kill me with scalding tea?!*

MINI EXTRA

Shizun: Brew me some tea.

Woodworker: Sure.

Shizun: Get me a blanket.

Woodworker: Sure.

Shizun: Groom my fur.

Woodworker: Sur—wait, what?

Chapter 22:
Shixiong

MO TIANLIAO WAS BEWILDERED. “Is the tea not to your liking?”

Ignoring him, Qingtong froze the tea with white mist from his fingertips until ice crystals formed before raising the cup to drink.

“Wait!” Mo Tianliao grabbed his master’s slightly cool hand—it was smooth and soft to the touch, and he couldn’t resist sneaking in a caress. Before his master could notice, though, he took the cup away. “Do you dislike it hot?”

Those eyes watched him silently, making Mo Tianliao’s heart flutter. He cleared his throat and privately pinched himself, then prepared a fresh cup of tea, pouring it back and forth between two jade cups until it was lukewarm before he handed it over.

This was how he prepared tea for His Feline Lordship when he had no frost jade bowl. Pawpaw didn’t like spring water from the mountains; he demanded tea in his cup. He would even throw a little tantrum if his tongue got scalded.

Shizun’s just like a cat… Mo Tianliao’s eyes curved as he watched those lips part slightly to drink the tea, feeling inexplicably satisfied.

After he’d gained power in his previous life, Mo Tianliao had never tried to ingratiate himself with anyone else, other than His Feline Lordship who reigned supreme over all. And now, looking at this particular shizun, Mo Tianliao couldn’t help but want to make him happy.

Demonic cultivators followed their heart's desires. He did things because he *wanted* to, not because they might benefit him.

"What are you looking at?!" A smack to the back of his head snapped him out of his reverie, pitching him forward. He rubbed his head, realizing abruptly how disrespectful he'd been, staring at his master.

"Sorry, that was rude of me…" Mo Tianliao refilled the tea and held up the slightly cooled grilled fish, warming it with the fire-element spiritual energy from his palm before offering it to his master.

Qingtong couldn't be bothered with this insolent disciple. He popped another piece of coldspring fish into his mouth.

"Disciple Yuli greets Shishu," a trembling voice said.

Mo Tianliao looked back to see a slender, nervous-looking young man bowing to his master. He thought back on the names of the disciples from the various sanctums… If he was right, this should be Yuli, the third personal disciple of Xuanji-zhenren.

Qingtong looked up, swallowed the fish, and extended the pink tip of his tongue to lick the seasoning off his lips. Yuli trembled even harder at this sight. His two seniors were both deeply intimidated by Qingtong, so they constantly foisted this job onto him, but had they ever considered that he was the one who feared this elder the most?!

"What is it?" Qingtong watched Yuli with interest.

"Um, uh…" Yuli gulped, took a deep breath, and began to ramble without looking up. "The sect leader's disciple, Moxiong-shixiong, and your disciple, Menghu-shixiong, have just returned to the sect. They are currently meeting the sect leader in Wotian Sanctum. He has sent me to

inform you.” As soon as the stream of words were out of his mouth, Yuli deflated like a balloon.

“All right, I got it.” Qingtong waved him away.

Looking as if he’d been granted amnesty, Yuli bowed and fled. Throughout it all, he’d acted like he hadn’t seen Mo Tianliao nor cared that he hadn’t greeted him. Mo Tianliao watched with interest, curious why Yuli was so afraid of his master.

“Shall I go to Woqing Sanctum to receive Shixiong?” Mo Tianliao volunteered when he realized that his master had no intention of going. If he wanted to live in Woqing Sanctum peacefully while he recovered his power, he’d need to get along with his senior. After all, the guy was a late-stage core formation cultivator who would soon break through to the nascent soul stage.

“No need.” Qingtong finished the last piece of fish and accepted a white silk handkerchief from his maidservant to wipe his hands clean. “He’ll be back soon.”

As a core formation cultivator, his senior could ride his sword across the arched bridge in no time. By the time Mo Tianliao arrived at Wotian Sanctum on foot, the guy could already be back here massaging his master’s legs.

Scratching his head, Mo Tianliao joined his master in lazing around. The maidservant took back the handkerchief, cleared the fish bones and the leaf wrapping, and vanished just as quickly as she’d arrived.

As expected, within a quarter of an hour, a tall, imposing man with a commanding presence hurried through the bamboo grove. He had even

features, and his large, round eyes gave him a somewhat fierce look. This was his senior, Menghu.

“Shizun!” Menghu cried out as soon as he crossed the arched bridge and found his gorgeous shizun sitting in the rocking chair. He rushed over, fell to his knees with a thud, and kowtowed three times. “I’m back.”

Mo Tianliao quickly stood up and stepped aside.

Qingtong glanced coldly at the large head at his feet and smacked him on the back of his skull. “So, you did still remember to come back!”

“Heh heh…” Menghu rubbed the back of his head. “We were held up because Moxiong got injured.”

Qingtong looked sidelong at the grinning disciple and gestured for him to rise. Menghu sprang to his feet. Finally noticing Mo Tianliao, he grabbed him and patted him heartily on the back.

“This must be the new disciple. Ha ha, he sure looks sturdy!”

The corner of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. Was the guy pounding him like a drum just to see if he was sturdy? Still, he looked up and flashed an affable smile. “Greetings, Shixiong. I’m Mo Tianliao.”

Menghu’s eyes crinkled into a grin. He’d been waiting for over a century for a junior. This one seemed pretty docile, though; he’d have to watch over him in case the other disciples bullied him. “I’m Menghu. We’re brothers from now on—ask if you need anything.” He stuffed a small inventory pouch into Mo Tianliao’s hands as a greeting gift. “Here, have fun with it.”

Mo Tianliao took the pouch and scanned it with his divine sense. It was packed full of many rare items; Menghu must have collected them on his travels. Mo Tianliao looked silently at him. This guy’s expression

screamed *this gege will protect you in the future*, and he seemed a little simple-minded—maybe Mo Tianliao could take advantage of him.

That evening, Mo Tianliao was in his courtyard drawing water to irrigate the peach tree. Now that it was fall, the peach tree was beginning to shed its leaves, and some of the smaller branches had already withered. Mo Tianliao pinched a withered branch, intending to break it off, when a surge of wood-element spiritual energy flowed from his fingertips to the branch.

Raising an eyebrow, he grasped the branch and channeled wood-element spiritual energy into it. He'd heard that people with a heaven attribute of wood could master a technique called the Spring Revival. It could bring withered plants back to life, since pure wood-element spiritual energy was a life force for plants. But it could only revive ordinary plants and had little effect on spiritual herbs and trees rich with spiritual energy, so the technique wasn't that useful.

As he expected, the branch quickly regained vitality. Bored, Mo Tianliao was about to retract his hand when he discovered that the branch hadn't just returned to life, it had also sprouted several tender buds.

"Huh?" Astonished, Mo Tianliao leaned in for a better look. Even if the plant came back to life, it shouldn't have been budding in fall.

"Shidi!" Before he could work it out, he heard an enthusiastic voice calling out for him from behind. Slowly, he turned to see a large head peering over the tall fence—yep, it was his new senior.

Menghu's courtyard was right next to his. He'd known this since he moved in, but it had slipped his mind since no one had been living there until now.

“Shixiong.” Mo Tianliao snapped the branch off and tossed the pieces to the ground before walking over to bow to him.

“Hey, no need for all these formalities between us. Shizun doesn’t care for them either.” Menghu waved his hand, jumped over the fence, and pulled Mo Tianliao into the house. “Come on. I’ve got something to discuss with you.”

“What is it?” Mo Tianliao asked calmly, sitting down at the table.

“Shizun must have his reasons for trusting you since he took you as his disciple, so I won’t pry.” Menghu waved the door shut and set up a protective barrier to isolate all sound within the room.

Mo Tianliao lowered his hand, secretly summoning a row of wooden spikes made of Sinking Agarwood between his fingers. Schooling his expression, he smiled. “Feel free to speak freely, Shixiong.”

MINI EXTRA

Eldest Shixiong: I have a question, Shizun.

Shizun: What?

Eldest Shixiong: Why was Shidi allowed to join our sect when he has no fur?

Shizun: *extends claw* *scraaaatch scraaatch*

Eldest Shixiong: Oooooh! A scratching post! I want one too!

Shizun: *brandishes claws, sends him flying with a swat*

From then on, Woodworker and Eldest Shixiong went from being chance acquaintances to sworn friends.

Chapter 23:
Three Mulberry

MENGHU GLANCED AROUND, then pulled out a jade box with a greenish-yellow hue. This shade of jade was associated with the wood element and was typically used to preserve spiritual herbs without elemental attributes.

“What’s this?” Mo Tianliao didn’t touch the box, looking at his senior.

“It’s a long story.” Menghu opened the box. “This is the main reason I’ve been out training. It was incredibly difficult to get—Moxiong even got injured for it.”

There was a layer of ice crystals inside that released tendrils of cold air when the box was opened. In the center lay a fruit that was vividly red but unappealingly wrinkled, likely because of the long journey. But Mo Tianliao could tell that it was the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit!

The Three Mulberry was an extremely rare divine tree with no branches; the fruits formed in the grooves of its trunk every thirty years. These fruits had the precious ability to condense the divine soul and prevent it from dissipating.

“What a strange fruit. What do you plan to use it for?” Mo Tianliao looked at Menghu, his expression betraying nothing.

“Oh yeah, it’s pretty rare. You have no idea how much trouble I went through. It’s beneficial to Shizun, so I’m thinking of offering it to him.” Menghu still didn’t mention its name or use.

Mo Tianliao's heart sank. A complete divine soul was like a fully intact egg. It wouldn't dissipate unless it was damaged. It was like an egg: The contents were safe as long as the shell was intact, but if the shell was cracked, the egg white would gradually dry up and evaporate in the sunlight. The Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit basically added another layer of membrane to the divine soul, preventing further loss.

It seemed his master's divine soul was damaged, then.

"You could just offer it to Shizun. After all, it's such a valuable item. Why bring it to me?" Mo Tianliao wondered. The wooden spikes remained between his fingers.

Menghu scratched his head, stood up, paced around the room, and plopped back down. "Shizun seems to dote on you, so I thought you could give it to him."

Mo Tianliao looked down and said nothing.

Realizing he might have been a little abrupt, Menghu got up again and paced another round. He hadn't explained what this fruit was, so maybe his junior thought he was trying to sabotage him? "I'll be honest," he said. "This divine fruit is beneficial for the soul, but its appearance has deteriorated on the long journey. You know Shizun—he won't eat it if it looks unappetizing. I thought we could go together, and you can help persuade him to eat it."

Mo Tianliao looked at his senior leaning over the table with wide, impatient eyes, and felt the urge to bully him. "There are countless spirit beasts on the back mountain. If his divine soul is unstable, Shizun could just find one of them to tame. Why—"

“He’s—already has a spirit beast.” Menghu paused. “You’re new to the sect, so there are things you don’t understand yet. Spirit beasts can only soothe one’s inner demons and agitation. They’re not a cure-all.”

Shizun has a spirit beast? Mo Tianliao was curious—why hadn't he seen it? Before he could pry further, Menghu stood up, clearly not planning to say more, and tried to pull Mo Tianliao along to see their master.

"Wait." Mo Tianliao took the jade box and touched the wrinkled fruit with his fingertip. A weak current of wood-element spiritual energy surged toward the fruit. He quickly pulled his hand back. "I might have a way to make this fruit fresh again."

"Really?" Menghu's eyes lit up. This junior of his was no ordinary man.

"I can't be sure. Can you give me a few days?" Mo Tianliao handed the box back to Menghu.

"Sure, you keep it." Menghu pushed the box back to Mo Tianliao. "Just call me when you're done." With that, he withdrew the barrier and left in a hurry, like he was worried Mo Tianliao might try to return the fruit.

Mo Tianliao didn't know what to make of this pure-hearted senior handing him such a precious item without hesitation. Wasn't he worried Mo Tianliao might eat it himself, or damage it? He put the jade box away in his inventory bracelet.

"Whoa!" Menghu, who'd just stepped out, exclaimed in surprise.

Mo Tianliao hurried out to find a white cat perched on the fence and his senior half crouching before the animal.

"Oh, uh…you're here for Shidi too, I guess." Menghu laughed nervously.

His Feline Lordship glanced haughtily at this dumb disciple and swatted him with a paw.

“Um, I, uh…should get going. Those little brats haven’t seen me in a while. Who knows if they’ve been keeping up with their training…” Menghu didn’t even wait to finish talking before he got out of there.

“Pawpaw.” Mo Tianliao walked over and picked the cat up. His senior was friendly to the cat, so it seemed like the little fluffball had been treated well at Woqing Sanctum over the years.

“Meow…” The white cat climbed into Mo Tianliao’s arms with a lazy yawn.

“Where have you been? I grilled some fish but couldn’t find you anywhere, so I gave it to Shizun.” He kissed the soft little head and walked out with the cat in his arms.

This Spring Revival skill he’d learned on his own must have been different from the one other cultivators practiced; probably something to do with his undying tree body. He would need to check the ancient texts and restore the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit as soon as possible. His master’s damaged soul couldn’t wait.

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A DEEP ABYSS LAY between Woqing Sanctum and the arched bridge; to get across, he’d have to fly. But he didn’t have enough spiritual energy for it as he hadn’t established his foundation, so he couldn’t ride his sword over. Usually, he depended on his master or the second-generation disciples to help him get across, but that was rather inconvenient.

Recently, Mo Tianliao had crafted a small flying ship—hardly large enough to be called a ship, really—that could fly if equipped with a spiritual stone. It was simply made, only the size of a plate, and could only travel a few yards, but it would be enough to cross this natural chasm.

He took out the oddly shaped plate, stepped onto it, and inserted a low-grade spiritual stone. The plate slowly rose.

The ability to control a flying sword or flying ship depended on having sufficient spiritual energy and a divine soul. Flying swords relied purely on the cultivators' spiritual energy, and without an established foundation, one's spiritual power wouldn't be enough to sustain flight. Flying ships, on the other hand, consumed spiritual stones instead—and since Mo Tianliao still had his divine soul, he could control it.

Crossing the arched bridge, he made a beeline for the Blessed Sanctuary of Ten Thousand Scrolls.

The blessed sanctuary featured a myriad of rocky mountains stacked like row after row of bamboo slips. A nine-story pagoda towered among them, with black gold for walls and crystal for roofs—it was a magnificent sight. With a disciple's jade token and several spiritual stones for the admission fee, one could enter and consult the texts.

The gatekeeper accepted Mo Tianliao's spiritual stones and made sure he was aware of the rules. "Disciples at the qi-refining stage may only view materials on the first floor. Do not go upstairs. Remember that."

Mo Tianliao nodded and went in with his cat.

The first floor was mostly a depository of paper books, many of which contained basic knowledge on cultivation. Many of the inner disciples were browsing through them; after all, they had to study on their

own without the guidance of a master, and the seniors who taught techniques didn't have the patience to run through everything with them.

Mo Tianliao glanced around. These books were too basic to be of much help to him, so he made his way to the second floor, a book repository meant for cultivators at the foundation establishment stage.

No one was standing guard, as the books here were of little use to qi-refining cultivators. Mo Tianliao ignored these as well and continued upward.

Between the second and third floors was a protective barrier designed to detect divine souls. Those without divine souls couldn't get through—a measure intended to protect the low-level disciples. Jade slips recorded using divine sense couldn't be viewed by cultivators without a divine soul, either. Anyone trying to force their way into one of those documents would damage their soul.

Mo Tianliao walked through it unimpeded. He pressed his forehead against the long piece of jade at the stairway and instantly got an overview of the location of every book at a glance. It didn't take long at all for him to find the record on divine trees. Picking up the aged jade slip, he pressed it against the center of his forehead.

Divine trees were different from spiritual trees. They were trees that had survived since ancient times, and it was possible each was the only one of its kind in existence. Spiritual trees, on the other hand, were trees of varying ages that were useful to cultivators and could be cultivated. Currently, fewer than twenty types of divine tree still existed on Taixuan.

The cat wiggled out of Mo Tianliao's arms and climbed up a rack that held rows of neatly arranged jade slips. Then, he swiped all the jade slips

off with a paw and swished his tail in amusement.

By the time Mo Tianliao finished reading and opened his eyes, the rack in front of him was a complete mess, and His Feline Lordship was perched smugly on the highest shelf, licking his paw.

For a long moment, Mo Tianliao stared at him, too stunned to speak.

“What happened here?” A slightly rotund core formation cultivator walked over. Even though his eyes were wide in surprise and he looked a little angry, he was still speaking slowly. “These jade slips each have a designated spot. How could you mess them up like this?”

Mo Tianliao stood up, quickly trying to think of a way to talk his way out of this.

“Meow!” The furball bounded down and shoved off another row of jade slips right in the cultivator’s face. Both Mo Tianliao and the cultivator gaped at the cat in wordless silence. Once he’d had his fun, he sprang onto Mo Tianliao’s shoulder and swished his tail.

The rotund cultivator collected himself and smiled. “I’m Yuanhai, the chief disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji-zhenren. You must be Qingtong-shishu’s youngest disciple.”

“Greetings, Yuanhai-shixiong.” Mo Tianliao quickly bowed. “I apologize for my cat’s misbehavior.”

“Oh…no worries.” Yuanhai waved away his apology and ambled over to the rack to organize the jade slips. “Leave this to me. You should go down now. You might get in trouble if someone were to see you on the third floor.”

“Thank you, Shixiong.” Mo Tianliao didn’t know why Yuanhai was being so nice to him, but he was glad not to have to stay and clean up.

Without any further formalities, he picked up the cat and prepared to leave. “By the way, which of the disciples are skilled in elixir concocting? There’s something I’d like to get their advice on.”

At the last banquet, Yanlie had told him he could ask his fellow seniors if he was too embarrassed to ask his master. Having different masters didn’t mean they couldn’t freely communicate and exchange knowledge.

Yuanhai glanced at the cat in Mo Tianliao’s arms. Slowly tucking his hands together in his sleeves, he smiled. “You can look for Huaqing. He’s an elixirist.”

Huaqing… Mo Tianliao recalled the flamboyantly dressed senior he’d met at the birthday celebration. The corner of his mouth twitched, though he still cupped his hands in thanks before he left.

The records on the undying tree were limited. They only stated that this divine tree possessed regenerative powers. As for how to use this power…no one knew. After all, no one had ever been a divine tree before. To test this regenerative power, Mo Tianliao would have to find some spiritual herbs to experiment on, and if he wanted to find someone with a good supply of spiritual herbs, of course he should turn to an elixirist.

Huaqing, who was over at his apothecary grinding powder, sneezed. He rubbed his nose, feeling as if someone was plotting against him. Nothing would befall him today…would it?

MINI EXTRA

Pawpaw: You’re acting like it’s a bad thing for me to pay you a visit.

Huaqing: Nothing could be worse!

Pawpaw: *flashes claws* Say that again.

Huaqing: It’s truly an honor to have you grace me with your presence. I’m so happy I’m gonna faint. QAQ

Chapter 24:
Exotic Plants

MO TIANLIAO carried the cat out of the book repository and frowned. It seemed like the first-generation disciples who could see spirit beasts had all seen Pawpaw, but none of them found it strange to see him carrying a spirit beast around. Then again, he would expect no less of a major sect like this which boasted a huge supply of both money and spirit beasts.

Looking down at the little fluffball playing with his paws, he smiled. At least Pawpaw had been treated well at the sect all these years. He hadn't been locked up in a cage or forced into a blood pact. He supposed that was to be expected. Most of the cultivators preferred ferocious spirit beasts that could assist them in battle. Imagine if one of them had acquired a Feline Lordship instead…

Huaqing's apothecary was in Woxuan Sanctum. Mo Tianliao entered with his personal disciple jade token. He heard the sound of water as soon as he crossed the bridge, where he was greeted by a vast aquamarine lake. Zigzagging bridges forged of black crystal intersected from various directions across the lake's surface. In the center stood the main palace of Woxuan Sanctum, where Xuanji-zhenren lived.

Mo Tianliao tucked the cat into his robe and grabbed a passing second-generation disciple to ask for directions.

"The apothecary is over that way. Let me take you there." The disciple showed Mo Tianliao to a small valley in the east. Sword-riding was

prohibited within the three sanctums, so they both meandered their way across the dizzying zigzag bridges.

Splash! The shell of a huge turtle broke the lake's surface. Mo Tianliao whipped his head around to look, but the shell had already resubmerged.

"Is this lake for raising spirit beasts?" Mo Tianliao was surprised they'd so casually put the spirit beasts on display to the second-generation disciples and ordinary inner disciples.

"Oh, no. Just this one." The disciple smiled sheepishly. "That's the sanctum-master's spirit beast. He doesn't like appearing in public, and he usually only shows half a shell at most. He's harmless."

They crossed the lake to a clear stream flowing from a mountain ravine, with a row of round stones in the middle of the water. The disciple said this was as far as he could escort him and told him to follow the stones upstream to the valley.

The valley was quiet and peaceful. To Mo Tianliao's surprise, there were no spiritual herbs or trees there, only a dazzling array of flowers in a riot of colors. Even though winter was just around the corner, this valley was still as warm as it had been in spring, with blossoms in full bloom everywhere.

At the end of the valley stood a thatched cottage with wisps of smoke occasionally rising from its chimney. At first glance, it looked like a farming household in the mortal world.

Buzz—an invisible barrier blocked Mo Tianliao's path forward.

A colorful figure darted out of the thatched cottage and flitted across the flowers like a dragonfly skimming water, swiftly reaching Mo Tianliao.

“Look who we have here! Mo-shidi, what brings you here?” The figure waved his hand to remove the barrier and let Mo Tianliao in.

“Sorry to impose,” Mo Tianliao said as a pleasant floral fragrance assailed him.

“Achoo—!” The cat in his arms sneezed and poked his head out of the collar, looking around before sneezing again.

The bright smile on Huaqing’s face froze the moment he saw the white cat. “N-no need to stand on ceremony.”

He wasn’t concocting elixirs today, just processing some materials in his elixir furnace. After inviting Mo Tianliao to take a seat, Huaqing removed the materials from the furnace and placed them on the table to crush. The heated material released a black liquid with a sweet fragrance.

Mo Tianliao frowned. Although he was no expert in concocting elixirs, he could tell this liquid was poisonous; it certainly didn’t look like something needed for concocting elixirs.

“Know what this is?” Huaqing tipped some pills onto the table, soaking them in the black juice. The red pills instantly turned dark green. “This is fun stuff. Once you eat it, you’ll grow green fur!”

G-grow green fur?!

“This is my birthday gift for my Shixiong.” Huaqing smugly placed the pills in three bottles and handed Mo Tianliao one. “Here. One for you.”

Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. Why in the world would he need a pill that would give him green fur?

“Meow!” The cat jumped out of Mo Tianliao’s arms and latched onto the hem of Huaqing’s colorful robe.

Huaqing immediately started hopping anxiously. “Sh-Shidi, can you…take the cat away?”

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow, surprised this senior was afraid of cats. “Shixiong, I’d like to see the spiritual herbs garden.”

“O-oh, that… You’ll need to look for Bailuo. I only have elixirs here… Wah! Take him away!” Huaqing was on the verge of tears.

As it turned out, Huaqing focused solely on the act of concocting elixirs itself. All the spiritual herbs and trees in the sect fell under the jurisdiction of one Bailuo, a disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader. If he needed any spiritual herbs for concocting elixirs, Huaqing would just go to Bailuo.

Astonished at his reaction, Mo Tianliao picked up the cat and stroked his fur. Just then, another buzz sounded from the array in the valley. Huaqing quickly fled to let the visitor in.

Mo Tianliao hid the cat back in his robes. The visitor was a familiar face, the very same heaven-attribute young man who’d joined the sect on the same day as Mo Tianliao and been taken under Xuanji-zhenren’s wing. Mo Tianliao remembered his name was Cheng Xi.

“Shizun sent me to fetch something.” Cheng Xi said with a docile smile as he followed behind Huaqing, addressing him sweetly as “Second Shixiong.” But then he saw Mo Tianliao, and his expression fell. He lifted his chin slightly.

This annoying dual-attribute trash again! Cheng Xi pursed his lips, fully intent on ignoring Mo Tianliao.

Of course, Mo Tianliao noticed the young man’s contempt. Pretty funny. He casually lifted the bottle in his hand and said to Huaqing, “Thank

you for the pills. I'll take my leave, then."

Huaqing didn't try to keep him—he was only too glad for him to leave. Cheng Xi, however, clenched his fists at the sight of the celadon bottle. He tugged at Huaqing's sleeve.

"Shixiong, how could you give pills to people from another realm but not to me?"

Huaqing, who had his back to Cheng Xi, rolled his eyes, but he plastered on a smile and turned back to hand him a bottle. "If you want, take some. Have fun."

Cheng Xi was delighted. Huaqing was famous among the orthodox sects as the Flaming Flower Elixirist, and his elixirs were highly sought after. Every one of his creations was extraordinary, even the ones he concocted impulsively. To Cheng Xi, who was still at the qi-refining stage, this was a valuable treasure. He left practically skipping with both the item his master had sent him for and the precious pill his senior had given him.

Having nothing to show for his busy day, and seeing as the sun was setting already, Mo Tianliao decided to return to Qingning Palace and look for Bailuo tomorrow. He didn't see any sign of his master, and the cat in his arms jumped down and ran off, refusing to sleep with him, so he reluctantly returned to his own courtyard alone.

Several disciples of the Chamber of Administrative Affairs were waiting for him at the entrance. Mo Tianliao frowned. "Your shifu is back, so there's no need to come to me about these matters anymore."

The disciples exchanged looks. "Shifu said you're doing a better job than he is," one of them said, "so he's washing his hands of these matters."

Menghu had been thrilled when he found out that his junior had done an efficient job of managing all the routine affairs over the past few months—and no less effectively than Yanlie at that. Finally free from losing fur over these trivial matters day after day, he'd insisted on continuing to entrust this important job to his junior.

Meanwhile, the idling senior himself went to Qingning Palace to look for their master.

The inner chamber was brightly lit, offering a clear view of the furnishings within. Thick, white cushions covered the floor. The snow-white cat was lounging lazily in the center, where he almost blended in with the cushions. Without his exceptionally keen eyesight, Menghu would have missed him.

He took off his shoes and threw himself down before the cat. "Greetings, Shizun."

The cat lazily opened his eyes and yawned.

Menghu scratched his head and rolled over. Yellow light flashed, and a tiger about five and a half feet long with bright orange fur appeared on the soft cushions. "Shizun! Let's roll around!"

Ignoring this silly suggestion, Pawpaw stretched lazily before jumping onto the tiger's head. The weather had been a little cold lately. It'd be warmer sleeping on a tiger-skin rug.

The tiger lay obediently still, not daring to move with the little furball on his head. "Shizun, Shidi doesn't seem to be a spirit cultivator, but he isn't human either."

Qingtong hummed an acknowledgment and swished his tail.

“He’s pretty good at managing the routine affairs, not at all like a newcomer to the sect.” The tiger sprawled on the ground, so flat he looked like a real tiger rug from afar. When he didn’t get a response, Menghu twitched his ears. Feeling the even breathing on his head, he wisely shut up and spent the entire night sprawled out like that, serving as his master’s fur rug.

The next day, Mo Tianliao still couldn’t find his cat, so he went to look for Bailuo on his own.

Most of the sect’s spiritual herbs were planted in the Blessed Sanctuary of a Hundred Herbs. New disciples with the wood attribute would sometimes be assigned here to look after these spiritual herbs.

The Blessed Sanctuary of a Hundred Herbs was divided into several zones. The outer areas contained regular spiritual herbs that ordinary disciples could tend to, while the inner area contained rare spiritual herbs and trees that required supervision by the specialized inner disciples. As for the innermost medicinal garden, only first-generation personal disciples and the three sanctum-masters had access.

Gracing the medicinal garden were several thousand-year-old trees that provided shade, as well as countless exotic flowers and plants. Because of the abundance of spiritual energy, they occasionally emitted specks of spiritual glow. It was a beautiful sight.

Bailuo, dressed in a white, formfitting outfit, was squatting on the flower path, looking in concern at a spiritual herb. This spiritual herb was shaped like a sword, with perfectly straight stems, except it had no leaves. Or, more precisely, the leaf stalks were bare. The leaves had been eaten, every single one.

“Ha ha ha, you’re in trouble again,” an annoying voice said from behind him. Bailuo looked back to see a gloating Zimo. Zimo bounced over and shook his head. “How many times have I told you?” He clicked his tongue. “Show some restraint even if you’re hungry. How can it survive with all its leaves eaten off?”

Bailuo glared at him and said nothing.

“Come on, have a chicken drumstick.” Zimo pulled out a roasted chicken from his sleeve. “This is Shizun’s favorite Swordleaf Grass. He’s going to eat you up for ruining it—here, be a good bunny and have some meat. Eat your fill before you pass on.”

Bailuo clenched his fists, driven beyond the limit of his endurance. He smacked the drumstick away, grabbed Zimo by the collar, threw him over his shoulder to the ground, and followed up with a punch.

“Bailuo, how dare you! I’m your shixiong!”

“So?”

“Ow, ow, ow!”

When Mo Tianliao entered, he saw one of his seniors straddling another senior, the latter struggling and panting heavily. The two in question, sensing someone’s presence, halted mid-tussle and looked back stiffly, frozen in place with the one on top pinning the one below by the wrists and the one below pushing against the chest of the one above.

“Please continue, gentlemen. I’ll come back again another day.” Mo Tianliao turned to go back the way he came.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: See no evil. I’m leaving.

Bailuo & Zimo: Chotto matte! It’s not what you think it is.

Chapter 25:
Plant Restoration

REALIZING ABRUPTLY what this looked like, the two of them yelped in surprise. Bailuo jumped to his feet and tidied his clothes. “Ahem, don’t misunderstand. Second Shixiong and I were…”

“Just sparring!”

“…Fighting over a drumstick!”

The two spoke at the same time, and the atmosphere grew even more awkward.

They glared at each other. Zimo picked up the drumstick from the ground and brushed the dirt off the leaf wrapper. As he passed by Mo Tianliao on his way out, he whispered, “Bailuo’s in a bad mood. Don’t provoke him further. He’ll bite.”

Smack! A clod of dirt hit Zimo squarely on the back of his head, making him stumble. Mo Tianliao expected Zimo to retaliate, but he used the forward momentum to dash off without once looking back.

Mo Tianliao turned to look at Bailuo, only to see him squatting by the bald Swordleaf Grass, looking at it worriedly.

Mo Tianliao noticed the bare stem. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Uh, someone ate these leaves, but without leaves, it will die soon.” Bailuo looked up pitifully at Mo Tianliao with wide eyes.

Mo Tianliao crouched beside him. “I’ve learned a new technique named Spring Revival. Want me to try?”

“It won’t work.” Bailuo shook his head. “This is an Earth-grade spiritual herb.”

Spiritual herbs and trees were classified into four grades: heaven, earth, black, and yellow. The higher the grade, the more valuable and the harder it was to cultivate. Heaven-grade ones were rare, like the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit his own senior had found. Typically, an earth-grade spiritual herb was considered a high-level material.

Spring Revival couldn’t even save a yellow-grade spiritual herb, much less this earth-grade plant.

Mo Tianliao touched the Swordleaf Grass and channeled a wisp of wood energy, along with the regenerative power of the undying tree, into the spiritual herb. Soon enough, a tiny, inconspicuous sprout had emerged on the stem.

Mo Tianliao quickly retracted his hand. He had initially meant to find a spiritual herb to test out his power, but he really hadn’t been expecting the regenerative power to revive even a low-grade spiritual herb. He pursed his lips as he considered what to do next.

Bailuo, finally processing what had happened, grabbed the hem of his clothes. “You—” He’d been staring at this spiritual herb for a whole day, so he could make out even the slightest change. “What an amazing ability!” The normally quiet Bailuo sprang up in delight and pulled Mo Tianliao deeper into the garden.

Shockingly, this medicinal garden of rare spiritual herbs had many half-dead plants. Some had rotten fruits, some were missing half their leaves, and bizarrely enough, some even had broken roots.

“How in the world did this break?” Mo Tianliao held a broken root with a jagged end, feeling very puzzled indeed.

Bailuo instinctively shrank inward at the question. “Uh, it was b-bitten off.”

“Bitten?” Mo Tianliao was even more astonished now. The place was heavily guarded, with a protective barrier in place. Humans, birds, and beasts wouldn’t be able to enter. It couldn’t have been insects, could it?

Bailuo lowered his head and picked at the dirt. How did this junior manage to make him as nervous as his eldest senior always did? “Never mind that. Just see if you can fix it.”

Mo Tianliao fiddled with the broken root, a plan starting to form in his mind. “Shixiong, I assume this has to be kept secret from the others, including the sect leader, right?”

Bailuo’s head snapped up and he looked at him coolly.

“I’ve only just found out about this ability of mine today. If word got out, it’d cause trouble for me too.” Mo Tianliao patted Bailuo on the shoulder as if he hadn’t seen the murderous intent in his eyes. “How about this? We’re brothers, right? So we should keep each other’s secrets. If you don’t tell anyone, I’ll help you fix these plants. Deal?”

Bailuo nodded vigorously, touched. “Of course! We’re brothers!”

Mo Tianliao smiled. He now had leverage over Bailuo, and since the guy needed him to come regularly to restore the spiritual herbs, he definitely wouldn’t sell him out.

Holding the severed ends together, Mo Tianliao aligned the roots and channeled wood energy to stimulate the growth of tiny new roots. The severed ends didn’t reconnect, but the plant could survive now. But two

plants in, Mo Tianliao broke out in a sweat, and his lips turned pale—signs of spiritual energy depletion. He gasped for breath. “Shixiong, my spiritual energy is exhausted. What if I come another day—”

“No worries, I have spiritual stones.” Unwilling to let him leave, Bailuo took out a handful of low-grade spiritual stones.

Mo Tianliao glanced at them and lowered his eyes. “Fine, but the spiritual energy from these low-grade spiritual stones isn’t pure, so the restoration effect won’t be as good.”

“Then we won’t use low-grade ones.” Bailuo took out another handful of glowing, evenly colored spiritual stones, each the size of a baby’s fist.

Different grades of spiritual stones had different purity and volume. Using high-grade spiritual stones was beneficial to the meridians, since there was less residue and thus less obstruction.

Marveling at how gullible Bailuo was, Mo Tianliao pocketed the spiritual stones so that he could take them out one by one as he needed them. As he absorbed spiritual energy from the spiritual stones, he channeled it to the plants. Once each stone was depleted, he would start absorbing from a new one, boosting his own spiritual power in the process. This was how Mo Tianliao had cultivated in his previous life—as an artificer, he’d had a never-ending supply of spiritual stones.

The two crouched in the medicinal garden restoring plants the whole day. They discovered that Mo Tianliao’s Spring Revival couldn’t speed up the growth of spiritual herbs or revive ones that were already dead; it could only increase their vitality.

Where his regenerative power revolved around undying life force, spring revival was all about rebirth.

“So, your technique shouldn’t be called Spring Revival but Perpetual Regeneration,” Bailuo suggested.

Mo Tianliao looked at Bailuo in surprise. But the guy was only saying it offhandedly, he realized. He smiled and bade him farewell, citing the late hour.

“Hey, wait!” Bailuo felt bad seeing Mo Tianliao’s pale face and passed him a basket of spiritual fruits. “Thank you very much for your help today. Take these and remember to visit often!”

Mo Tianliao looked at the fresh, juicy spiritual fruits. These weren’t precious medicinal materials; rather, they were fire-element spiritual fruits called Flamefruit, which not only contained pure fire spiritual energy but also tasted delicious.

In actuality Mo Tianliao had only used up half of the high-grade spiritual stones and pocketed the rest without any guilt, and that balance had more than made up for his fee today.

Mo Tianliao accepted the basket with a smile.

After returning to Qingning Palace, he meditated for a night to recover his spiritual energy before taking out the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit.

He’d tested his skill on several damaged spiritual fruits yesterday and found that partially eaten fruit couldn’t be restored to its uneaten form, but fruit that was no longer fresh could become plump and juicy again. Holding a high-grade spiritual stone, he absorbed the spiritual energy through his left palm and channeled it into the wrinkled fruit through his right.

Depleted of its spiritual energy, the spiritual stone in his left hand disintegrated into gray powder. One high-grade spiritual stone wasn't enough to restore a heaven-grade celestial fruit, of course, so Mo Tianliao quickly took out another without interrupting the flow of spiritual energy. It took three high-grade spiritual stones and all of Mo Tianliao's spiritual energy to just barely restore the wrinkled fruit, making it plump and juicy. Now, the red fruit was almost transparent. Occasionally, a spiritual light glowed within, making it look like a superior fire crystal.

Mo Tianliao wiped the sweat from his brow and returned the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit to the frost jade box. Making his way next door to look for his senior, he chanced upon several second-generation disciples.

"Are you looking for my shifu?" the ever gentle and enthusiastic Suheng asked. "I saw him heading to Qingning Palace earlier."

Mo Tianliao nodded, guessing he'd gone there to look for their shizun. In that case, he could just deliver the fruit directly.

Qingning Palace appeared especially bright in the daylight. His stunning master in white lounged lazily on the plush couch, reading a book. Most high-level cultivators preferred jade slips that could convey information instantly, but he had to admit that the sight of this beautiful man holding a book was truly enchanting. His long hem trailed to the ground, and his bare feet rested on a tiger rug that accentuated their fairness, while his toes peeking through the fur were round and dainty, with a hint of pink.

Mo Tianliao stared, spellbound. He'd never imagined a man's feet could be so attractive. He mentally swallowed his drool and approached,

softly calling out, “Shizun…”

The tiger rug snapped its eyes open and stared at him with eyes as big as copper bells—it was alive!

MINI EXTRA

Shizun’s Unique Taste in Choosing Disciples.

Woodworker: Why did Shizun take Shixiong as a disciple?

Eldest Shixiong: Obviously, because of my intelligence, exceptional aptitude, and adorable looks!

Shizun: It happened to be winter that day.

Woodworker: What has that got to do with anything?

Shizun: I needed a paw warmer.

Eldest Shixiong: QAQ

Chapter 26:
Seclusion

MO TIANLIAO GAVE A START and looked at the tiger-skin rug curiously. It was brimming with spiritual energy and vitality, clearly a high-level spirit beast.

“What’s the matter?” Qingtong set down the book and pressed down on the tiger’s head with his feet.

Mo Tianliao snapped back to his senses. He looked around, but there was no sign of his senior. He couldn’t exactly ask his master either, as it’d seem like he was only here for his senior’s sake…

He took out the frost jade box. “This is the soul-condensing medicine that Shixiong went to great lengths to find during his training. He’s asked me to bring it to you.”

The tiger on the floor twitched his ears. Reassured by his junior’s integrity, he kept still on the ground.

Qingtong picked up the pretty Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit in the jade box and tapped on the tiger’s ear with his toe. The tiger blinked at the luscious spiritual fruit in his master’s hand. Was this really the same wrinkled fruit he’d brought back?

Qingtong examined the fist-sized fruit. It was juicy and bigger than his mouth, so he’d make a mess eating it. He set it aside.

“Shizun, it’s best to eat this fruit while it’s fresh,” Mo Tianliao coaxed him. The soul-condensing fruit was like clay; it was best consumed

while it was still full of moisture, so that it could perfectly envelop the soul and form a more solid shell.

As he explained, Mo Tianliao took the fruit and cut it into slices with a small knife. He arranged them neatly on a white-jade plate before presenting them to his master.

The tiger gaped at Mo Tianliao's cutting technique and obsequious behavior. Wasn't this a little over-the-top?

Qingtong glanced between Mo Tianliao and the plate, and then he reached for a slice. The soft flesh of the fruit melted instantly in his mouth, and the sweet juice alleviated a little of the dull ache in his head as it went down his throat.

"Yanlie pays his respects to Shishu." Dressed in a vibrantly colored wide-sleeved robe, Yanlie bowed in greeting, his voice measured and pleasing and carrying a hint of a smile.

Mo Tianliao rose and made way for him, while Qingtong gestured for Yanlie to dispense with the formalities.

"Greetings, Shixiong," Mo Tianliao said.

The tiger under Qingtong's foot chimed in. "Whurr…"

Yanlie returned the greetings with a smile, his pretty eyes curving into crescents as he patted the tiger on the head. "It's about the two Qingyun Sect assholes you killed before. I've pushed the blame onto the demonic sect."

Mo Tianliao recalled he'd used the demonic cultivator's broadsword to kill that qi-refining cultivator from Qingyun Sect. What was his name again?

“He Xijiu was the legitimate grandson of Elder Yunsong of Qingyun Sect. Qingyun Sect didn’t say much once they learned what happened, but Elder Yunsong was furious.” Yanlie’s eyes betrayed his disdain for the elder. That dead guy had been an incompetent wastrel, but he’d been the apple of Elder Yunsong’s eye, just because he was his only descendant.

Cultivators had long lifespans, and before their ascension, they should ideally sever all worldly ties and attachments. Yanlie couldn’t understand why Yunsong was so insistent on preserving his bloodline.

Qingtong picked up another slice to nibble on. “It’s all about keeping up appearances.”

But whether it was about preserving his bloodline or keeping up appearances, Elder Yunsong had vowed not to let the matter rest. In fact, he was already on the way here, ostensibly to get to the truth of the matter and to pay Woyun Sect a courtesy visit.

“The matter at the foot of the mountain has been dealt with, but Elder Yunsong won’t be an easy one to handle. You’ll need to make preparations.” Yanlie took out a folding fan made with a red jade frame and silk leaves. “Yunsong’s elemental attribute is wood, so you might be at a disadvantage against him. This Skyburn Fan contains half a month’s worth of my spiritual energy. You can use it in case of emergency.”

Mo Tianliao frowned. Was this elder coming here just for a fight?

Even among the demonic sects, when the demon lords met, they wouldn’t immediately come to blows with one another. After all, brawling like street thugs was undignified and unfitting of their status, so they were usually polite to each other. How could the orthodox sects, who were

always so particular about their reputation, communicate in such a barbaric way?

“No need.” Qingtong pushed the fan away. There were two copies of this fan, both of which were Yanlie’s spiritual treasures. “I’m not afraid of him.”

Water nurtured wood, so water-attribute Qingtong would be at a disadvantage if he went up against wood-attribute Yunsong. However, Qingtong’s element was more specifically ice, and he could simply impale his opponent with ice spikes.

Yanlie put away the fan without insisting on it. After discussing the arrangement for receiving Yunsong, he left.

“Shizun, what’s the current situation with Qingyun Sect?” Mo Tianliao remembered that Qingyun Sect had been the top sect before his death, and they had always acted like hypocrites. What had made them become so reckless?

“Three hundred years ago, Woyun Sect was too weak to contend with the Qingyun and Liuyun sects. But both sects suffered heavy casualties during the massacre at the Annihilation Valley, so they are getting desperate.” Qingtong scoffed and glanced at Mo Tianliao before lowering his eyes again.

Mo Tianliao was taken aback. He hadn’t expected the massacre to affect the balance of power among the orthodox sects. He wondered what it was like now among the unorthodox sects.

Dizzy from all the listening, the tiger yawned and rolled onto his side with limbs outstretched, revealing his white, plush belly fur. Qingtong’s fair feet shifted from the tiger’s head to that warm belly.

Having finished the fruit, Qingtong held his hand out for the maidservant to clean his fingers. He closed his eyes and dismissed them all with a wave of a hand. “I’m going into seclusion for a few days. You may go now.”

Mo Tianliao blinked. Again?

The gorgeous man in white rose, and the tiger got up as well, shaking his fur.

Frequent seclusion wasn’t the proper way to cultivate. Other than boosting one’s spiritual energy and mastering one’s technique, cultivating one’s mental state was equally important—and that required a cultivator to engage with the secular. “Shizun…” Mo Tianliao tried to remind Qingtong.

Cold, beautiful eyes turned to him, glistening with…sleepiness.

Mo Tianliao swallowed his words. “What’s your soul beast’s name?” he asked instead. Fierce spirit beasts without a blood pact couldn’t play freely with other people like Pawpaw did. Most of the time they’d tear people apart. He’d logically assumed that this tiger was the soul beast of his master that his senior had mentioned.

“Chubby.” Qingtong waved his hand impatiently and left for the inner chamber. The tiger, trotting ingratiatingly behind him, stumbled when he heard this name, and the door shut in his face.

Mo Tianliao walked over and patted the tiger on the head. A trauma in his childhood had turned him into a man who was always guarded against others, but he’d always had a soft spot for fluffy animals. “All right, Chubby. You can’t disturb Shizun when he’s in seclusion. Come with me. I’ll grill some meat for you.”

The tiger roared at him.

“Hush! Keep your voice down!” Mo Tianliao poked the tiger on the head and left the main hall.

Outside, the warm sunlight shone down on Qingning Palace’s jade steps, making them look inviting. Mo Tianliao sat down and patted the spot beside him. “Come on, Chubby. Let’s chat.”

The tiger pounced on him, planting his front paws on his shoulders, and snarled into his ear. *Don’t call me Chubby!*

Mo Tianliao dug into his ear. “Fine, fine. I know you’re happy. Tell me, what does Shizun usually do when he’s in seclusion?” The seclusion of the average person lasted anywhere from roughly half a month to a few years, but his master’s seclusion took only two to three days.

The tiger scratched his neck with his hind paw. *Not telling you. That’s what you get for being rude to your shixiong.*

“The Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit needs to be further processed after consumption, but I’m not exactly sure how…” Mo Tianliao frowned. Heaven-grade spiritual fruits would usually produce some reactions after being eaten. But he’d never had one before, so he didn’t know if there were any adverse effects.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt that there was something off about his master’s hasty retreat. He bolted to his feet, startling the tiger, who’d started licking his paw.

“Be good and stay quiet, Chubby. I’m worried about Shizun. I’m going to check on him.” Mo Tianliao patted the tiger—spirit beasts could understand human speech.

Mo Tianliao walked softly to the doors of the inner chamber. After a moment’s thought, he withdrew his divine soul from his limbs. Crouching

behind him, the tiger was astounded to find Mo Tianliao's aura growing weaker and weaker until it practically disappeared altogether.

Mo Tianliao pushed the doors open with his stiff wooden hand and shuffled in. He could have condensed his divine soul in his head if he hadn't needed to walk. That way, he would appear as a tree to any cultivator. It was the perfect way to hide his presence.

It was quiet, and the white curtains were tightly drawn, dimming the room. A person lay quietly on the bed in the middle.

Mo Tianliao curled his stiff lips into a smile. He knew it! His master was sleeping! He approached slowly, his footsteps silenced by the soft cushions on the floor. The tiger followed him in and squeezed his way to the bed.

Mo Tianliao froze when he got a clear look at the face of the person on the bed. Cold and flawless, it looked like it was sculpted out of jade. Thin lips pressed lightly together, slightly pink and moist from the fruit he'd been eating. He looked even more ethereal than usual…because his long ink-black hair was now white.

Normally a person with silver hair would appear aged, but with his white hair, Qingtong was even more attractive. It wasn't the frosty gray of old age, but a soft, creamy white that somehow seemed all too natural and fitting for this exquisite man.

Something clicked just below the surface in Mo Tianliao's mind. He stared in a daze for a long time—then at last he reached out with trembling fingers to touch Qingtong's face, only to be thwarted by the tiger.

Chapter 27:
Foundation Establishment

THE TIGER STOOD before the bed and silently bared his fangs at the approaching Mo Tianliao. *The audacity! How dare he try to take liberties with Shizun! He's got a death wish!*

Mo Tianliao snapped back to his senses and retracted his hand. Silently watching the captivating man sleeping on the bed, he slowly clenched his fists under his sleeves until the veins bulged, before just as slowly releasing them. Then he turned and left, dragging the tiger along with him, as if nothing had happened.

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While the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit envelops a divine soul, the damaged soul will be difficult to control, and the afflicted may fall asleep for many days.

Mo Tianliao removed the jade slip on heaven-grade spiritual fruits from his forehead and lowered his gaze. Hard to control, huh?

Mo Tianliao didn't disturb his master's "seclusion." Instead he focused on cultivating on the back mountain.

He chopped down a Fruitscent Tree. Bending the wood, he drilled holes in it with his wood energy and burned through it with his woodfire like he was threading a needle, releasing the fruity aroma to its fullest

extent. He caught a spiritual rock sheep, then slaughtered and skinned it before setting it up to grill over the fire.

Rock sheep often frequented the mountain cliffs, where they consumed only spiritual herbs with spiritual energy. As such, their meat was fresh and delicious, with no gamey smell. The tender meat had a layer of fat on the outside which melted and dripped onto the fire, sizzling as it grilled.

Mo Tianliao slowly brushed on a layer of sauce. Looking at the white horn in his hand, he took out a small carving knife and chiseled out a beautiful face with delicate eyebrows, thinly pursed lips, and eyes that were barely closed. The carving knife paused over the eyelids, and he wondered if the cold eyes underneath were as black as ink or as light as glass.

“Hey, Shidi! Grilling meat, are we?” An enthusiastic voice from behind him pulled him back from his daydreams.

Menghu had been training nearby, but the aroma of grilled meat kept distracting him from it. He’d given up and come looking for the source of this temptation, only to find his junior spacing out by the fire.

“Shixiong.” Mo Tianliao greeted him and put away the horn in his hand.

“Nice cooking skills.” Menghu squeezed in beside Mo Tianliao and looked at the grilling meat, slick with dripping oil. “Looks like you’ve been diligently practicing with the cultivation manual that Shizun gave you.”

“Did you have to do the same thing?” Mo Tianliao looked at him, remembering that the juniors had said that Menghu also chopped trees and built fires when he first joined the sect.

Menghu gave a dry cough. “My elemental attribute is purely fire, so Shizun had me burn things as part of my training. I figured…since I was

burning things anyway, I might as well grill something edible…" His voice grew smaller and smaller as he spoke. Their master had soon discovered his grilling escapades and forced him to deliver a portion of the cooked food to him every day, to "elevate his training progress." He'd clearly enjoyed this cultivation method enough to add the clause for grilling meat into the manual before he gave it to his junior.

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. Menghu didn't admit it in so many words, but he could guess what had happened. Shaking his head with a wry smile, he sliced some of the grilled meat onto a leaf.

"Oh, no need to stand on ceremony with me. I'm not Shizun." Menghu glanced at the meat slices. They were thinner than he preferred.

Ignoring him, Mo Tianliao wrapped the meat in the leaf and set it aside. He then handed his senior a cleaver, his message clear: *They aren't for you; if you want some, slice it yourself.* Resigned, Menghu took it and hacked off a leg to gnaw on.

Mo Tianliao ate a few slices and watched his senior wolfing down the meat, his mouth covered in grease. "Shixiong, how was Shizun's divine soul damaged?" he asked casually.

"Hm?" Menghu looked up and blinked, then swallowed the meat and wiped his greasy lips. "Uh, I don't know either. It was already damaged when I joined the sect. The sect leader has sought all sorts of precious cures for him, but none have ever worked." Menghu's head drooped in dejection.

"Take your time eating, Shixiong. I'll take this to Shizun." Mo Tianliao stood up and patted his senior on the head. "If you're free any time soon, could you come to the back mountain to give me some pointers?"

Menghu nodded. “Sure. Wait for me here tomorrow. Same time.” It was his responsibility to guide his junior, after all.

After Mo Tianliao had left him to gnaw on the mutton leg for a while, Menghu belatedly realized that his junior had patted him on his head earlier! Such disrespect! He chomped down hard on the meat. He’d have to teach him a lesson tomorrow.

Arriving at Qingning Palace, Mo Tianliao found his master sitting in the courtyard basking in the sun. His long hair had reverted to its normal inky black color.

Feigning ignorance, Mo Tianliao sat by the rocking chair with a smile and opened the leaf. He’d been channeling fire energy from his palm, so the meat was still hot and crispy.

“I grilled some mutton earlier. Please try it, Shizun,” Mo Tianliao said gently as he offered the leaf to Qingtong.

The beautiful, narrowed eyes opened to look at the appetizing meat. “I’m long past the need for food.”

Mo Tianliao smiled and didn’t push him further. He took out a handful of glass beads. “I carved these the other day for practice. I hope you like them.”

“What is this supposed to mean?” His long, slender fingers brushed those crystalline beads, then paused. Who in the world gave their shizun glass beads?

“No particular meaning. I just thought they were pretty, and I didn’t know who else to give them to.” He played with the beads in his palm for a moment, then picked one up and flicked it, sending it rolling around the bamboo pavilion with a series of crisp clinking sounds.

Qingtong's slender hands, resting on his lap, instantly gripped his robe. He averted his gaze, but his hands remained clenched in response to the sound the bead was making. Mo Tianliao's heart ached at the sight. He picked up the bead, wiped it off, and placed all of them into Qingtong's palm.

"I'm going to cultivate now." Mo Tianliao said nothing more and left.

Once he was out of sight, Qingtong opened his hand. The beads clinked gently in his palm. He pushed them around with a slender finger and pursed his lips. "I don't like the gamey smell of mutton…"

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THE NEXT DAY, Menghu waited for Mo Tianliao at the same place, cracking his knuckles in anticipation of teaching his junior a lesson.

But Mo Tianliao was unfazed. "I heard you're skilled with the broadsword," he said. "My spiritual energy has been increasing of late, but I have no one to practice with."

"Not a problem. I can suppress my cultivation to match yours." Menghu eagerly reduced his cultivation to qi-refining stage and swapped his precious blade for an ordinary magical saber. "It hasn't been all that long, but your cultivation has improved by leaps and bounds."

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. His senior didn't seem all that surprised by the speed at which his cultivation was increasing. He looked down and took out a wooden sword.

“Shidi, I switched to an ordinary magical weapon for you, but why are you switching to a wooden sword?” Menghu wasn’t too pleased—surely his weak junior was going to be knocked down in one move.

Mo Tianliao said nothing. He attacked with a flourish of his sword.

“Whoa!” Startled, Menghu dodged the sword before it could pierce him in the armpit. His guard went up at once.

In his previous life, Mo Tianliao’s basal attributes had been average. Apart from spamming spiritual stones to increase his spiritual power, he spent his days and nights training. He made sure he was proficient in everything, from swordplay to using spells with pure spiritual energy. Before he’d made his name, he’d studied under a certain old sleazeball who’d taught him all sorts of underhanded moves.

The wooden sword imbued with spiritual energy aimed straight for Menghu—he blocked the blow, only for thorny vines to shoot out from the sword’s tip toward his eyes. Menghu dodged them with a tilt of his head and grabbed the vines, and a trail of fire shot back along the vines from his fingertips.

Quickly discarding the burning vines, Mo Tianliao spun into the air and flicked a finger, sending a tiny fire snake darting forward toward Menghu’s crotch to set it on fire.

“Yow!” Menghu leaped up in shock and rolled onto the ground. Absorbing the fire into his palm, he threw it back at Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao caught the flame with his wooden sword, and it blazed merrily at the sword’s tip.

“That’s so dishonorable!” Menghu huffed as he got up.

“No one cares about manners or methods in a life-and-death battle,” Mo Tianliao said nonchalantly as he let the woodfire burn down the wooden sword.

Finding it embarrassing to lose to his junior in battle, Menghu insisted on another match the following day. He lost again.

Never one to yield, he became more motivated with each defeat and kept hounding Mo Tianliao for a fight every day. Gradually, he stopped losing as fast, but Mo Tianliao’s never-ending repertoire of underhanded tricks drove him crazy. Mo Tianliao told him to raise his suppressed cultivation level to the foundation establishment stage—once he did, they finally managed to tie.

Through sparring with his senior, Mo Tianliao gradually mastered control over his divine tree body and integrated some of the techniques he had used a lot of in his previous life. His cultivation rapidly improved, until finally, on one fine morning, he broke through to the foundation establishment stage.

Establishing one’s foundation was the first step on the path to immortality, and establishing a solid foundation would trigger a minor atmospheric phenomenon. What had been a sunny morning turned overcast with dark clouds. A green and a red beam shot up from Qingning Palace’s side courtyard, twisting into a pillar of light that disappeared into the clouds.

Chapter 28:
Chaojun the Super Handsome

OVER AT WOXUAN SANCTUM, Xuanji-zhenren stood on the lake with his hands behind his back and gazed at the two beams of light in the sky. “The new disciple Qingtong took in is truly extraordinary to have established his foundation in less than a year.”

“Such brilliance must imply substantial power,” Yuanhai drawled from where he was standing on the zigzag bridge.

“Indeed. He’s even faster than those with a heaven attribute.” Huaqing chuckled, poking Yuli with his elbow.

Yuli reacted to his cue. “Oh, yeah.”

Hearing this conversation, Cheng Xi clenched his fists. He’d thought he was a prodigy for reaching the third level of the qi-refining stage within a year. But now that dual-attribute trash had already established his foundation? How was that possible?! Just then, his fingers brushed against a cool porcelain bottle in his sleeves.

Oh right! It must have been because Mo Tianliao had eaten the secret pill Huaqing gave him!

Seeing the disdainful looks his own master and seniors were throwing him, Cheng Xi decided to eat that secret pill tonight. He had to establish his foundation as soon as possible too, or he wouldn’t get to become a personal disciple!

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MEANWHILE, on a nearby mountaintop, a marten gnawing on a chicken drumstick looked up with interest and patted the white rabbit munching on grass beside it. “Who exactly is Mo-shidi?”

The rabbit ignored him and crunched through the grass stalks in his mouth before pulling out another one.

“Hey! You ate up all the Swordleaf Grass again!” the marten shouted.

The rabbit froze, looked down at the newly shorn grass, and silently swallowed the half-chewed stalk in his mouth.

“Oh my, what are we going to do now? Shifu hasn’t had his dinner today. Maybe I should send you over.” The marten held the drumstick in his mouth and hopped around in front of the rabbit.

“Shut up!” The rabbit sprang up and slammed into the marten, sending him flying, then plopped down on top of him.

The rabbit was a chubby, round ball of fur, while the marten was a slender little thing. The marten struggled from where he was pinned under the rabbit, but the only thing still visible was his large tail slapping against the ground.

“You two are fighting again!” Yanlie, who had come to summon his two juniors, walked over in resignation and picked one up in each hand. He shook the dusty marten. “Change to human form and follow me to Woyun Palace. We have guests coming.”

The marten jumped onto the ground and transformed into the charming Zimo. “Who? Not that bunch from Qingyun Sect coming to make trouble, I hope.”

The rabbit, behaving again now that his senior was here, jumped down and transformed into the docile Bailuo.

Yanlie narrowed his pretty eyes. “You need to stay on your toes. We folks at Woyun Sect will take just about anything except someone else’s crap.”

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TO ESTABLISH A FOUNDATION meant channeling the spiritual energy from all over the body into the core at the dantian, much like various rivers converging toward the ocean. Mo Tianliao slowly opened his eyes. An abundance of spiritual energy swirled in his core, and the once-lackluster woodfire finally came alive in a spirited dance.

Mo Tianliao glanced at the heap of shattered spiritual stones beside him and quirked a smile. Now that he’d established his foundation and he was chock-full of spiritual energy, he’d be able to use some of his higher-level spells. He could finally ride on his sword, too, and travel to faraway places in search of his divine artifact.

Pursing his lips, he picked up the jade slip for *The Art of Burning Wood* and held it against the center of his forehead, wanting to see what came next after the foundation establishment stage.

New words appeared in his consciousness, but the technique remained at qi-refining stage level. As to how to cultivate beyond the foundation establishment stage, there was only one statement: *Figure it out yourself!*

Speechless, Mo Tianliao put the jade slip away and walked out of his courtyard to find a man in white standing beneath the peach blossom tree.

Winter had passed, and spring had come. Before he'd realized it, a year had gone by, and the peach blossoms in the courtyard were blooming again. The tree of light pink blossoms was as picturesque as misty clouds, but even that was no match for the person by the tree. The whole world paled in comparison to the handsome face that slowly turned to look at him.

"Why are you here?" Mo Tianliao walked over and reached for his hand.

Qingtong raised his hand to avoid Mo Tianliao's and frowned. *This insolent disciple is really getting more and more impudent, going "you, you, you" all the time. Where's his respect for his shizun? And the audacity to grab his master's hand. Outrageous!*

"Just passing by." Qingtong harrumphed and turned to leave.

Mo Tianliao was taken aback. Then his lips curved into a slight smile as understanding dawned on him—his master had come to protect him during his breakthrough.

***

MEANWHILE, Sect Leader Tianlang-zhenren, dressed in a gray cultivator robe, stood with his hands clasped behind his back at the hall entrance at Woyun Palace, waiting to receive the group from Qingyun Sect.

Rays of light in a riot of colors streaked across the sky and touched down. The one in the lead was Elder Yunsong, a white-haired cultivator

with a ruddy complexion, dressed in a dark azure cultivator robe with an emerald-green jade hairpin in his hair. Over ten disciples landed in unison behind him, all dressed in light azure cultivator robes with crowns of azure cloud design, putting up a display befitting a major sect.

In comparison, the cultivators from Woyun Sect wore a variety of outfits in various colors; some wore crowns, other wore hairpins, and then there were those who just left their hair down. They looked like a third-rate sect that couldn't afford to buy uniforms.

"It's been a long time, Tianlang-zhenren," Elder Yunsong said with a forced smile.

Tianlang stroked his beard and smiled back. "Indeed. You look even younger than before, Elder Yunsong."

Yunsong gritted his teeth. A cultivator's lifespan at every level had limits. Theoretically, their appearance would stop changing once they'd established their foundations. However, nascent soul cultivators who failed to break through to the soul transformation stage within a certain timeframe would begin to visibly age. Only when they ascended would they regain their youth. Someone like Tianlang-zhenren, who still maintained the appearance of a man in his thirties, was truly enviable. And what needed to be said about Qingtong, with his ethereal good looks?

It infuriated Elder Yunsong to no end every time he visited Woyun Sect.

Entering the grand hall, Yunsong looked around. "Where is Qingtong-zhenren?"

In Qingyun Sect, the generation of cultivators whose name started with "Yun" were the elders of the newly appointed sect leader. Since

Yunsong was visiting in person, the three sanctum-masters ought to have welcomed him together as a show of respect. But he was just an elder, in the end, so it wasn't a breach of protocol if Xuanji alone received him.

Yanlie faked a smile. "Qingtong-shishu's personal disciple has just advanced to the foundation establishment stage, so he's probably—"

"Hah!" Yunsong interrupted Yanlie with a derisive laugh. "I heard he took in a dual-attribute young man as a personal disciple. It has been only a year. How could he have established his foundation already?" He gestured for a disciple behind him to step forward. "Yanlie, do you still remember him?"

Yanlie looked at the man with thick lips, a flat nose, and shifty eyes. He had no impression of him.

When he saw Yanlie didn't remember him, the man clenched his fists. "Ten years ago, I came to Woyun Sect seeking discipleship, but you rejected me because you said I looked plain!"

Zimo curled his lips. "How is that 'plain'?" he whispered to Bailuo. "More like hideous."

"His name is Chaojun—super handsome, just like his name suggests—and he has a heaven attribute! You people don't know what you're missing!" Yunsong scoffed, while Chaojun lifted his chin in pride at the mention of his heaven attribute.

The clouds supersede the lands miles beyond; the wind transcends the heavens high above. Following the words in the poem, the generation name Chao—"super"—came right behind Yun—meaning "clouds"—so this Chaojun was Yunsong's disciple and not his grand-disciple. The "jun" in his name, of course, meant "handsome."

“Our founder’s rule explicitly says not to accept those who are ugly,” Yuanhai drawled in his usual slow way, which made it sound like he was deliberately drawing out the words *those who are ugly*. This just made Chaojun more pissed off.

“Well then, I’ll have to meet this disciple you accepted based on looks. I’ll see for myself how capable he is.” Yunsong looked grim. This sect wasn’t giving him any respect at all. “Didn’t this disciple just reach the foundation establishment stage? Ask him to fight a match with my disciple. If he can’t win, you’ll answer for my grandson’s death!”

Hidden behind his beard, Tianlang’s lips curled, revealing a fang. Oh, how he yearned to bite this old geezer to death!

Yanlie, standing beside the sect leader, pressed down on his shifu’s shoulder, silently urging him to stay calm. It wouldn’t be a good look for them if word were to get out that a Woyun Sect leader bit a Qingyun Sect elder to death in a fit of anger.

“Oho, so Yingjun—oh no, I mean, Chaojun.[6] If I’m not wrong, you’re already at mid-level of the foundation establishment stage. Won’t it seem like we’re looking down on Qingyun Sect if we send a disciple who has just established his foundation and whose spiritual energy is still unstable to fight against you?” Zimo dug a finger in his ear and chuckled.

“My shizun is merely speaking in a fit of pique. Our Qingyun Sect would never throw our weight around like that.” Chaojun snorted. “But your sect needs to give us an explanation for my junior’s death!”

The tension in the air was almost palpable.

“Since you want a match, a match it is!” A clear voice chimed out as a streak of white light descended into the hall.

He of moonlight radiance, pure and flawless;
eyes shut in repose, an intoxicating sight.

A moment of stunned silence fell upon the grand hall—the Qingyun Sect disciples who were seeing Qingtong for the first time were particularly stunned. Frowning, Mo Tianliao stepped forward to block their view.

They snapped back to their senses and looked at the disciples behind Qingtong-zhenren. One was tall and handsome, and the other…was more than just “handsome” could describe.

Cold, sparkling eyes; chiseled features. He was so handsome that it was almost blinding.

Looking back and forth between Mo Tianliao and Chaojun, the Qingyun Sect disciples had to concede that Woyun Sect’s decision had been correct. Only such a handsome man could stand beside a master like Qingtong without looking out of place. Putting Chaojun there instead would be like building a latrine in front of a crystal palace. Just the thought of it gave them…secondhand embarrassment.

Chapter 29:
Challenge

"QINGTONG-ZHENREN," Yunsong said grimly. "It's been quite some time."

Acting as if he hadn't heard him, Qingtong accepted the white-jade teacup Yanlie offered him and took a sip before setting it down. Only then did he look at Yunsong, although he showed no sign of responding.

Yunsong's face flushed red with anger.

Chaojun stepped forward, glaring at Mo Tianliao. "Since Zhenren has accepted the challenge, I'd like to see just what kind of talent can advance from mortal flesh to foundation establishment in just one year." He was a talented man with a heaven attribute, yet he'd had to painstakingly cultivate day and night for ten years before he just barely managed to establish his foundation.

"This is a misunderstanding." Mo Tianliao smiled. "I was already at level nine of the qi-refining stage when I joined the sect." Cultivation sects accepted disciples regardless of their level, and those below the foundation establishment stage would usually be accepted. After all, there were independent cultivators out there who wandered by themselves for a long time before they sought the protection of a sect.

Hearing this, Chaojun held his chin even higher—Mo Tianliao must be just some self-taught rookie. "Well then, let's begin."

"Wait." Mo Tianliao held up a hand to stop Chaojun in his tracks.

Chaojun sneered. *Afraid now, are we?*

“It’s cramped in here, and we might prevent my shizun from drinking his tea. Let’s go outside.” Mo Tianliao politely gestured for him to go out.

One just wanted to humiliate the other, while the other was thinking about his own shizun—in terms of character, it was clear who the winner was.

Before Woyun Palace was an open space paved with adamantine jade, specifically designed for such impromptu “sparring.”

As the crowd headed outside, Tianlang-zhenren stroked his beard and telepathically transmitted a message to Yanlie: *Find out how Qingyun Sect knew Qingtong took in a disciple with dual attributes.*

Yanlie nodded. He’d noticed the same thing, and he knew he’d have to look into it quickly.

The two opponents stood on both ends of the paved area while the others gathered around to watch.

Chaojun, whose elemental attribute was earth, summoned a swirling vortex of yellow sand with his spiritual energy. “Since I’m slightly ahead of you in my cultivation, I’ll let you have three moves.”

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. This was common practice among the orthodox sects. When facing opponents of different levels and stages, the higher one would take a handicap.

“Well, then,” said Mo Tianliao, already moving. Three flaming wooden spikes went hurtling toward Chaojun’s face.

Chaojun’s pupils contracted, and he hastily erected an earthen wall for defense. But as soon as the wooden spikes stabbed into the wall they took root, sprouting vines that swarmed over the entire wall. Chaojun’s defenses crumbled, and Mo Tianliao sprang as the wall collapsed.

Startled, Chaojun conjured a pair of seemingly ordinary cymbals and crashed them together with a deafening clang. Yellow sand surged up toward Mo Tianliao, who summoned forth countless withered leaves to form a shield in front of him.

“Hey!” Zimo shouted. “Didn’t you say a handicap of three moves?! It’s only been two!”

Chaojun had been caught off guard; he hadn’t expected someone who’d just established his foundation to switch stances so quickly. If he didn’t make his move now, he’d be forced into a defensive position. He channeled his spiritual energy into his palms and struck the cymbals again.

Mo Tianliao flicked a black orb between the cymbals just in time for the treasure artifact to smash it to pieces, unleashing the spatial array within. Two vats’ worth of oil splashed out, soaking into the yellow sand—and then a small fire snake darted forward and turned the oil-soaked sand into a sandstorm of fire with Chaojun at its center.

Chaojun stomped his foot, raising an earthen wall about three yards high around him. Earth could resist fire. As long as the earthen wall held, the fire wouldn’t reach him.

The Woyun Sect disciples watching couldn’t help but fret. Mo Tianliao had only just established his foundation. If the guy stayed inside his defenses, Mo Tianliao would be in danger once his spiritual energy was depleted.

But Mo Tianliao wasn’t worried. He ignited a wooden spike, sprang into the air, and lobbed it over the earthen wall. Chaojun scrambled to seal off the top, but his hastily constructed ceiling couldn’t stop the Sinking Agarwood infused with spiritual energy. This wooden spike could pierce

through rock, after all. The earthen wall collapsed instantly, and his oil-soaked clothes burst into flames on contact with the woodfire. Chaojun summoned more sand to cocoon himself, just barely managing to put it out.

Narrowing his eyes, Mo Tianliao conjured forth a wooden sword, blazing with woodfire, and lunged.

“Insolent brat!” Seeing him make his killing move, Elder Yunsong couldn’t sit still anymore; he struck out, sending a palm-strike at Mo Tianliao.

A chill ran down Mo Tianliao’s spine. No matter how capable he was, he couldn’t possibly take a blow from a soul transformation master with his meager foundation establishment cultivation.

Wham! A fair, jade-white hand steadily met the fatal blow head-on, and the ensuing blast of spiritual energy sent Mo Tianliao flying. Menghu leaped into the air and caught him by the collar.

Meanwhile, Qingtong and Yunsong traded a flurry of blows. Tianlang-zhenren promptly erected a defensive barrier to shield everyone else from Woyun Sect. Two soul transformation cultivators battling it out was no joke! The shockwaves could destroy the whole of Wotian Sanctum.

Seeing the situation deteriorate, the rest of the Qingyun Sect disciples hurriedly took shelter behind the shield. Even Chaojun himself scrambled for shelter, covering his butt—it had been left exposed by the hole burned in his pants. But Mo Tianliao couldn’t be bothered to mock him. He was too busy watching the battle with a frown on his face.

Countless vines rose into the air as Elder Yunsong unleashed his wood-element spells. The vines multiplied, much like Mo Tianliao’s spell earlier—but a hundred times more powerful. Countless brambly vines shot

straight toward Qingtong, who looked incredibly fragile amid the massive wave of dark thorns.

But he stamped once, and glistening frost spread from beneath his foot, freezing every vine with such accuracy that not even a single icicle was wasted. The Qingyun Sect disciples gasped in awe at the precision of his spellcasting. Without casting another spell, Qingtong raised his hand and struck a colossal phantom palm at the frozen vines, shattering them to pieces.

Next, Yunsong summoned countless wooden spikes that hung in midair like a bed of nails and hurled them at Qingtong. This spell was extremely taxing on the divine soul, as the spellcaster had to control every spike, so only those with powerful divine souls could use it. On seeing this move, most people would immediately put their defenses up, but Qingtong merely scoffed and spread his hands, summoning countless icicles to meet the wooden spikes head-on.

Wood collided with ice, sending a shower of wood splinters and ice shards raining down on the cultivators. The beautiful man in white charged through the debris, punched through Yunsong's defense, and socked him squarely in the eye, leaving him stunned.

What kind of fighting style was this?

But Qingtong wasn't inclined to explain. He grabbed his opponent and pummeled him with his fists. Finally, he snapped, "Have some dignity!" and left as gracefully as he came.

The onlookers peered at the bruised and battered Yunsong, and then at Chaojun with his hands clasped over his rear. They couldn't process what

had just happened. This was supposed to be a battle between high-level cultivators…right?

Mo Tianliao frowned as he watched the white light streak back toward Woqing Sanctum. After informing his senior, he followed after his master, leaving a group of people staring at each other in awkward silence.

Entering Woqing Sanctum, Mo Tianliao disregarded the rules against sword-riding in the realm and raced anxiously toward Qingning Palace.

Qingtong couldn’t hold it together any longer. As soon as he was back in the palace, he collapsed—just in time for Mo Tianliao to catch him in his arms.

Mo Tianliao’s frown deepened as he looked at Qingtong’s deathly pale face, his tightly shut eyes, and his black hair—which was rapidly blanching snow-white. He hurriedly carried him into the inner chamber, which was still as quiet as ever.

He set Qingtong gently down on the bed and sat beside him. Closing his eyes, he took Qingtong’s pulse with two fingers on his fair wrist before opening them again to gaze at the unconscious man. Fortunately, his master wasn’t injured. More likely, he’d overstrained his divine soul, which was already damaged to begin with.

After some time, Mo Tianliao reached out and held Qingtong’s left hand. Gently, as if he was handling a precious treasure, he pulled back the wide sleeve to reveal a bracelet clasped tightly around his wrist. It was inlaid with strange gems and emitting a faint blue glow.

Mo Tianliao closed his eyes. He carefully pulled the sleeve back into place and drew the unconscious man into his embrace.

The warm force that had shielded his divine soul; the perpetually sleepy Pawpaw; the master with a damaged divine soul—it all made sense now, and the realization made Mo Tianliao’s heart ache so much it was more than he could bear. Slowly, he leaned in and gingerly placed a gentle kiss on that smooth forehead.

“Don’t be afraid, Pawpaw. I’m here now. Sweet dreams.”

Chapter 30:
Indolent Disciple

THE TEMPERATURE of the body in his arms was a little low. Mo Tianliao pulled the thin quilt over and wrapped it around them both. Enveloped in familiar warmth, the unconscious man instinctively relaxed.

It was still daylight, and sunlight filtered through the thin curtains, illuminating that exquisite face. Mo Tianliao traced Qingtong's features with a finger. Even though he'd guessed the truth, he still found it hard to get his head around. This silly little kitten who couldn't even cast a high-level spell three hundred years ago was now at the soul transformation stage, and he'd achieved all this with his divine soul damaged.

Spirit beasts theoretically advanced slower than humans; they lacked spiritual intelligence at level one and couldn't learn any cultivation techniques, so all they could do was slowly absorb the spiritual energy of the natural world. Low-level spirit beasts weren't much use to high-level cultivators, either. In fact, some cultivators were only interested in high-level spirit beasts at the nascent soul stage or above and skipped out on low-level ones altogether.

Mo Tianliao's eyes darkened as he slowly twirled a lock of soft, snow-white hair around his finger. The demon lords he knew of in his previous life had high-level spirit beasts who could already transform into human form. Each of them was strikingly beautiful, and their hair matched the color of their fur. His suspicions had been raised when he saw Qingtong's black hair turn white.

“My Pawpaw doesn’t like mutton, and he loves playing with glass beads…” Mo Tianliao said softly, his heart aching dully. He didn’t know how Pawpaw had learned the secret art of soul-splitting, or how he’d managed to envelop him with his divine soul at the moment of his death, but a spirit beast’s powerful divine soul was the only thing that could have protected and preserved his own divine soul for three hundred years.

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AFTER MENGHU WAS DONE dealing with the mess outside, he hurried back, only to find himself locked out of the inner chamber.

There were protective barriers set up in the inner chamber. Qingtong had passed out too quickly to activate them the previous two times, which was why Mo Tianliao had been able to slip in. But since he was inside now, he didn’t plan to let any other person—or tiger—in to disturb his master’s rest.

Menghu scratched away on the door for a while before leaving reluctantly to look for his own junior. He couldn’t find him anywhere, though. He scratched his head. Where in the world did that guy go?

The sun set and rose again. Qingtong slept for a day and a night.

The morning sunlight shone through the sheer curtains. Long lashes fluttered, and Qingtong slowly opened his eyes, his ink-black irises already transformed into breathtakingly beautiful orbs the color of glass that appeared clear and bright in the morning light.

Mo Tianliao said nothing, only watched him with a smile.

Still groggy from waking up, Qingtong wasn't surprised to see Mo Tianliao. Out of habit, he leaned in and nuzzled his face against his chest. Mo Tianliao's breath caught for an instant. He felt as though a feather had brushed across his heart, tickling it and his nose.

Qingtong stiffened, realizing the sensation was off—he was in his human form! Before Mo Tianliao could speak, Qingtong kicked him off the bed.

"Insolent disciple! What are you doing here?!" Qingtong propped himself up on his elbow and glared at the man on the floor. Damn, he'd even taken off his outer robe—he was holding his master while sleeping in just his inner garment. Outrageous!

Mo Tianliao got up from the cushions and boldly peered over the edge of the bed. "You fainted yesterday, so I—"

Stunned, Qingtong looked down at the snowy hair lying loose on his chest. Dizzy with panic, he felt his arms go weak. Just as he was about to collapse, Mo Tianliao quickly climbed back onto the bed and caught him in his arms. He gently massaged Qingtong's temples.

Qingtong was getting a pounding headache even as he reeled from the dizzy spell. He wanted to hit Mo Tianliao, but he couldn't muster up the strength. Eyes squeezed shut and teeth gritted, he hissed, "Insolent disciple! What are you doing?!"

"You are my cat, to begin with. Why shouldn't I hold you for a while?" Mo Tianliao replied matter-of-factly, showing no intention of letting go.

Qingtong froze, then slowly opened his eyes. Those light-colored glass orbs reflected Mo Tianliao's gentle, smiling face, the same expression

he always wore when he was looking at Pawpaw.

Mo Tianliao channeled his fire energy to his fingers and pressed them gently against the smooth skin of Qingtong's forehead, alleviating his headache. "The power that protected my divine soul all those years was you, right?" He sighed. "Silly cat…"

Cold eyes lowered as a fair, translucent hand raised—and the neatly trimmed nails became claws as Qingtong smacked Mo Tianliao in the face. *Insolent disciple! Where are you touching?*

Mo Tianliao didn't even get a chance to explain before he was thrown out of Qingning Palace for "taking liberties with his master."

His master refused to see him for days. Denied entry, he felt a bit helpless.

He went to the Blessed Sanctuary of Ten Thousand Scrolls and searched through all the jade slips; he even searched the floor that was reserved for soul transformation cultivators. But he never found a way to cure Qingtong. Cultivators couldn't live long if their divine soul was damaged, but the records on spirit beasts were limited. After all, no spirit beast would split their own divine soul for no reason.

Mo Tianliao set down the jade slip and went to pay the sect leader a visit, hoping to get some information out of him. His senior had told him that the sect leader had been providing Qingtong with all sorts of rare treasures for years, so he must have known about Qingtong's damaged soul, which meant he'd know more about the extent of the damage.

But when he arrived at Wotian Sanctum, he was informed that the sect leader wasn't in. Instead he made his way to Woxuan Sanctum.

These three were fellow disciples. Mo Tianliao didn't know how they'd come to be fellow disciples with Pawpaw, a cat, but they'd been together for so many years and they tolerated his bad temper, so Mo Tianliao was sure they must be decent people.

Over at Woxuan Sanctum, Xuanji-zhenren sat on the principal seat in his palace on the lake and listened expressionlessly as Yuanhai made his report in his slow drawl.

"So, the sect leader wants the various sanctums to ferret out the spy. I thought about it, and I think the most suspicious members in our realm are those first-generation common disciples." Yuanhai handed his master a list of names.

Everyone on Taixuan coveted spirit beasts. This wasn't a good thing from the spirit beasts' perspective, and Woyun Sect was the only place that could protect them. Many spirit cultivators seeking discipleship had already evolved into human forms, and it was sometimes hard to discern their original forms. The sect leader would send these people to Xuanji for observation. If they were found to be human, they would be treated as common disciples.

As for why they weren't sent to Qingtong…

Over at Woqing Sanctum, in Qingning Palace, a gray-and-white wolf ran around a small cat. The cat was ignoring him, though, so he crouched down, raised his hindquarters, and inched across the soft cushions, nudging the little furball with his large nose. Quite predictably, he received a swipe from the cat's claws.

"Yow!" The wolf jumped and covered his nose. "Qingtong, can't you show your shixiong some basic respect?"

The white cat lifted an eyelid to glance at him. “Dumb dog.”

“Urgh!” The wolf finally lost his temper and bared his teeth. “I’ll give you one more chance. Acknowledge that I’m a wolf, or else—” His lips curled back to reveal two rows of glinting, snow-white fangs.

Pawpaw sat up and flicked his tail.

“Calm down! Sect Leader!” An enormous striped figure pounced over and pinned the snarling wolf to the ground.

“Arooooo!” The wolf struggled, but the tiger wouldn’t budge.

“Shizun has a bad temper,” he insisted, “so please be more understanding.”

The cat sauntered over and patted the dog’s head with a paw. “Didn’t you claim to be a descendant of the Celestial Hound?”

“That’s right!” The wolf wagged his tail proudly.

“And you still say you’re not a dog.” The cat stretched languidly and jumped onto the bed, too lazy to bother with him.

The sect leader was growing anxious now. “But the Celestial Hound is also one of my ancestors! Really! Dog’s honor!”

MINI EXTRA

Dog’s Honor

Little Tianlang: Tongtong, the meat Shizun cooks isn’t tasty at all.

Little Qingtong: Really?

Little Tianlang: Really. It’s so unappetizing I don’t feel like eating. Dog’s honor.

Little Qingtong: *pushes over the aromatic meat that Shizun cooked and looks at Shixiong*

Little Tianlang: …Woof!

Chapter 31:
Hemp Rope

HUAQING, MEANWHILE, felt the newly recruited Cheng Xi was the most suspicious one of all. The guy had been so passive-aggressive toward Mo Tianliao every day that he might as well have been screaming “I’ll never concede defeat!” all the time.

Xuanji thought his second disciple had a point, so he summoned Cheng Xi to question him.

The disciple who went to summon him didn’t return for a long time, which ratcheted their suspicions up a notch. After another long wait, a figure in a black cloak finally shuffled in.

“Cheng Xi, why are you coming before Shizun dressed like this?” Displeased, Huaqing shook his colorful outfit by way of demonstration. One should always dress up when presenting themselves before their shizun.

“It’s not good to dress so fancy either,” Yuli muttered to himself. He was standing next to Huaqing, and the dazzling array of colors was making him dizzy.

“What do you know?!” Huaqing flicked his junior on the forehead. “This is what’s called dressing up to please the elders.”

This grown man had already been mistaken for “shijie” several times. Yuli wanted to blow rude bubbles at him, but alas, he was in human form, so all he could do was roll his fishy eyes at him and ignore him.

Yuanhai slowly looked back at his two arguing juniors and then slowly turned back around. He always spoke so slowly, he might as well not intervene.

“Greetings, Shizun,” Cheng Xi said feebly from under his cloak.

“Cheng Xi-shidi, what are you wearing?” Huaqing couldn’t stand the sight of it. Who in the world came to see his master covered in a bedsheet? He walked over and yanked the hood back.

Silence fell upon the crowd. This good-looking young man now had green sideburns and green eyebrows; even his nose hair was green. His once smooth forehead had grown a layer of fine green fuzz as well. He looked like he’d grown mold.

“Um… Uh, what happened to you, Shidi?” Huaqing asked with a concerned expression, although he was secretly pinching himself on the thigh to keep from laughing out loud.

“I-I don’t know…” Cheng Xi was on the verge of crying.

Yesterday, Mo Tianliao had dazzled everyone by establishing his foundation a year after joining the sect and defeating a mid-stage foundation establishment cultivator. As soon as he left, chaos had erupted.

Back in Woxuan Sanctum, Cheng Xi had felt like everyone was looking at him differently. If a disciple with dual attributes could break through to the foundation establishment stage within a year, then as someone with a heaven attribute, he had to look like a fraud. How could he take it lying down? That damned Mo Tianliao; he must have taken some secret elixir—

Right! A secret elixir!

Cheng Xi had taken out the celadon bottle Huaqing had given him. It wasn't long after Mo Tianliao had been given a bottle of the same medicine that he'd established his foundation. This had to be a miracle elixir that could instantly boost one's cultivation. Mustering up his courage, Cheng Xi swallowed it, gathered his energy in his core, and waited for it to take effect.

But nothing had happened. His spiritual energy hadn't reacted. That was strange. He'd used his spiritual energy to catalyze a reaction. But a night had passed, and still nothing…

And then the senior had come to summon him to the main hall. The guy had been so shocked that at first he couldn't speak, and when he did, all he said was "Wh-what happened to you?" That was when Cheng Xi had realized something had gone wrong.

Everyone in the hall was stunned into silence by his story.

Yuanhai slowly walked over and patted the young man on the shoulder. "Uh, um… Green hair actually looks quite…nice."

Cheng Xi's tears finally spilled over. His eldest senior really was such a kind man.

Xuanji cleared his throat and dismissed Cheng Xi. "You can go back now." He also excused him from morning classes for a few days.

"Shifu, aren't we going to question him?" Huaqing blinked.

"With a brain like that…" Yuli shook his head. He'd never heard of anyone this dumb being a spy.

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MO TIANLIAO had only just stepped onto the zigzag bridge when he collided into Cheng Xi, who had been running with his head down. His sturdy divine tree body promptly knocked the young man over, and his hood slid off his head. It was like a scene straight out of a novel, where the incredibly handsome young master bumped into a harried young man. The inexperienced young man frantically tried in vain to grab his cloak from sliding off to reveal his…face covered in green fur.

The corners of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched. This simple-minded child had actually taken that pill!

Now his archrival had seen him in this state too! Heartbroken, and crying even harder, Cheng Xi scrambled to his feet and fled.

At the center of the zigzag bridge stood Woxuan Sanctum's Xuanning Palace. It appeared unremarkable from the outside, but inside, it was another world altogether.

The floor of the entire grand hall was paved with a kind of transparent crystal, and when the sunlight shone through, the crystalline lake waters beneath were visible through them. The light reflected by the water would create a mesmerizing display of rippling light on the floor.

"Greetings to Second Shibo." Mo Tianliao stepped forward and bowed.

Xuanji nodded. "What brings you here?"

Mo Tianliao got straight to the point. "There's something I'd like your advice on."

“I see. Let’s go to the rear hall,” Xuanji said, looking pointedly at his three disciples.

“Oh, I just remembered I have to open the elixir furnace today!” Huaqing slapped himself on the forehead. “Oops! It’s already so late. They’ll burn if I don’t get back now. See you later!”

“The second-generation disciples are learning water spells today. I’ll check on them…” Trembling slightly, Yuli glanced at Mo Tianliao and fled before his master could even respond.

Yuanhai slowly trundled toward the exit, but his master grabbed him by the collar. “Yuanhai, I *know* you have nothing going on today.”

Xuanji dragged Mo Tianliao to the back hall, a lavishly decorated chamber. This room had a transparent crystal floor too, and it held a large number of intricately designed wooden racks with an assortment of hemp ropes wound around them. The long ropes trailed over the roof beams, intersecting as they coiled around the wooden racks, like snakes slithering all over the room.

Xuanji pulled out a basket of dry hemp from the corner and sat casually on the floor. “I saw the move you used yesterday, the one with the vines. What is it called?”

“All Become One.” Mo Tianliao joined him on the floor; he figured he should follow his host’s lead since he was here to ask for advice.

Resigned, Yuanhai sat down and helped his master sort the hemp.

Xuanji nodded. “It’s a good move.”

All Become One was a high-level wood-element spell. Mo Tianliao had seen wood-element masters using it in his previous life, and he’d memorized it because he’d thought it was powerful. Elder Yunsong had also

used it yesterday, though much more skillfully than Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao wondered if Xuanji had studied it too.

"If you like techniques like that, you must like soft, long things, right?" Xuanji looked at him with shining eyes.

"…Huh?" Mo Tianliao was taken aback. What did that have to do with anything?

"You should come by when you're free to braid hemp rope with me. You know, to temper your mind." Xuanji handed Mo Tianliao a handful of dried hemp stalks and gestured for him to give it a try.

The corner of Mo Tianliao's mouth twitched. He might have been fooled if he were truly a novice who had just joined the sect. Who had ever heard of braiding hemp rope to cultivate one's mind? But he couldn't say that aloud, so he picked up the hemp and started braiding. As the number one craftsman in the world, this was child's play to him.

His long, slender fingers weaved the hemp nimbly back and forth as he braided the most complex eight-strand hemp rope variant. Xuanji's eyes widened, and he slapped his thigh. A promising talent! He looked at his eldest disciple, who was still struggling to weave a simple three-strand rope. He dismissed him with a disdainful wave of his hand. "You're not needed here anymore. Go play by yourself."

Yuanhai stood up as if he had been granted a reprieve and slowly walked out of the rear hall. It wasn't that he didn't want to run—he just *couldn't*. Reaching the main hall, he saw a silver carp swimming contentedly beneath the floor. Yuanhai tapped the floor, and the crystal slid apart. Splashing down into the water, Yuanhai transformed into a huge turtle and happily chased after the carp.

Heaven knows how torturous it was to ask a turtle like him to braid hemp ropes!

Meanwhile, as Mo Tianliao braided the ropes, he tried to wheedle more information out of Xuanji. “Seeing as Shizun is so close to you and the sect leader, I thought I should come more often to say my greetings.”

“That’s right. I grew up together with your shifu. All the ropes he played with came from my hands.” Xuanji beamed with pride.

Suppressing his mirth, Mo Tianliao asked about the divine soul in a roundabout way, but Xuanji flew into a rage at just the mention of it.

“Tongtong, that silly boy. I don’t know who he split his divine soul for, but if I ever meet that jerk, I’ll tie him up and throw him into the sea to feed the turtles!” He slapped on the floor, causing the turtle underneath to stumble and flip over underwater.

A stab of pain pierced Mo Tianliao in the heart at the word “split.” Overlooking the fact that Xuanji had called him a jerk, he quickly followed up with a question. “Is there any way to mend it?”

Xuanji lowered his head and shook it. After so many years, that portion of divine soul had probably merged with something else. Even if they could find it, how would they get it back? It was simply impossible.

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MO TIANLIAO TOOK the small ball of hemp ropes he’d made and returned to Woqing Sanctum with heavy steps.

“He’s back!” the tiger announced as he dashed into the house, interrupting the boisterously quarreling dog and cat.

Remembering how Mo Tianliao had thrown a rock at him before, the furious sect leader hurriedly jumped out the window and changed into his human form.

“Sect Leader, why are you here?” Mo Tianliao was astonished to see the dog-in-human-clothing sect leader. Hadn’t they said he’d gone out?

“Ahem! I noticed Qingtong looking pale yesterday, so I came to check on him.” Tianlang-zhenren stroked his beard and entered the main hall with Mo Tianliao.

One glance into the hall, and Mo Tianliao quickly moved over to Qingtong and pulled him into his arms, using his wide sleeves to conceal that snow-white hair. Pawpaw had always appeared with black hair all these years, so he must not have wanted the sect leader to know. However, his divine soul’s recent instability made it difficult for him to disguise his hair color. Mo Tianliao couldn’t let anyone see it.

The sect leader was just about to step over the threshold when his leg froze in midair. He almost fell over. Beside him, the tiger’s jaw dropped wide enough to shove in an entire goat.

MINI EXTRA

Woozy Sect’s Gossip Weekly

Newflash #1: Breaking news! Qingtong-zhenren caught red-handed by the sect leader in a secret rendezvous with his lover!

Newflash #2: New disciple climbs the ranks by climbing into his master’s bed! The world is going to the dogs!

Newflash #3: *leaked photo of scandalous hug* Frontline reporter Tiger risks his life to send this photo.

Chapter 32:
Taishi

MO TIANLIAO PAUSED, realizing his posture was inappropriate. Since when would a disciple embrace his master? He coughed dryly. “Shizun fainted again. I’ll carry him inside.”

But the man in his arms didn’t appreciate his good intentions. Qingtong shoved him away, following that up with a smack to the back of his head. He smoothed his tousled hair and glared at Mo Tianliao, his meaning all too clear: *Insolent disciple! You messed up my hair again!*

Mo Tianliao sat on the ground awkwardly and turned to observe the sect leader.

The leader was more surprised at how they’d been positioned before than he was at Qingtong’s white hair. “You… You two…”

Mo Tianliao picked himself up from the ground and sighed. He was an idiot—the sect leader knew Qingtong’s divine soul was damaged, but Qingtong had been living well all these years, so he obviously had to know that Qingtong was a spirit beast. He turned to the tiger, who was still staring with his jaw on the floor, and frowned.

“Everyone, out. I’m going to…ugh…” Qingtong stood up, then groaned and held a hand to his forehead.

“Qingtong!”

“Shizun!”

The tiger and the sect leader rushed over at once, but Mo Tianliao, who was the closest, was faster. He promptly took Qingtong back into his

arms, throwing all propriety out the window. “What’s wrong? A headache?” he asked anxiously.

Beads of sweat formed on Qingtong’s fair face. He closed his eyes and rasped, “Carry me back to bed.”

Mo Tianliao picked him up, hurried into the inner chamber, and set him down on the bed. His heart was aching as he stroked that sweat-soaked face. “Do you have any pills?”

Qingtong lifted his hand, and his sleeve slid down along his arm to reveal the blue-silver bracelet.

Mo Tianliao grabbed it. Anything made by Duantian was extraordinary, and this bracelet wasn’t just proof that this was his cat; it was also an inventory bracelet spirit beasts could use. The space within was huge, and as the owner, he could naturally access it whenever he needed to. It was very convenient for storing toys and treats for his cat.

There were a lot of items inside the inventory bracelet. Mo Tianliao noticed the small white-jade bottle labeled *Heaven-Grade Soul-Condensing Elixir* at the front and quickly took it out. Tipping one pill into his palm, he sniffed it. It was the right medicine, so he quickly fed it to Qingtong.

Qingtong looked a lot better after he swallowed the pill, though he still seemed listless and unwilling to talk.

The tiger stood on his hind legs by the bed and watched with concern. Seeing his master starting to feel better, he leaned in and tried to lick away his sweat, but Mo Tianliao grabbed him by the ear. “Stop messing around, Chubby.”

“*GROARR—*” The tiger was very displeased at the disrespect his junior was showing him.

Mo Tianliao flicked the tiger's head with a finger. Taking the soft cloth from the attendant, he wiped away the sweat from the man on the bed. No way was he going to let that silly tiger slobber all over his fastidious white cat; he'd be lucky if Pawpaw didn't throw a hissy fit.

When he saw Mo Tianliao using the inventory bracelet, Tianlang-zhenren understood everything. He patted Mo Tianliao on the shoulder and motioned for him to step out for a moment. Mo Tianliao nodded and covered his master with the blanket before following him out.

Now that they were gone, the tiger moved in again to lick his master's fur. Qingtong didn't even open his eyes to smack that big furry head. The tiger immediately behaved himself. Ears flattened, he rested his head on the bed and stared with wide, unblinking eyes at his master.

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"Sect leader," Mo Tianliao said as he followed Tianlang to the courtyard.

"So, you were the one who raised Qingtong for all those years?" Tianlang looked coldly at him. He was completely serious now.

Mo Tianliao met the sect leader's eyes. "He's been with me since he was a kitten."

"Bullsh—ahem, he got separated from me when he was still young, and then you just took him away, you shameless thing!" Tianlang was beside himself with anger as he thought of all those years he had spent

looking for his precious junior, only to find him on the brink of death with a damaged divine soul. How could he not be furious?

Mo Tianliao rubbed his nose, feeling a little pricked by his conscience. Back then, he'd thought the little kitten was pretty, and he hadn't even stopped to wonder if it was a spirit beast; he'd simply glanced around to make sure that no one was watching, then scooped it up and fled miles away on his number one flying ship in Taixuan.

But then again, what was that about a sect leader with a cat as his junior? Mo Tianliao narrowed his eyes and was about to say something when the sect leader took him by surprise and threw a punch at him. There was nothing he could do to withstand or dodge a soul transformation cultivator's fist, and so instead he immediately withdrew his divine soul from his face.

Thud! The blow connected, and the sect leader yelled in pain. He hadn't even used spiritual power, but hitting a divine tree with his bare hand hurt like hell!

"Are you all right?" Mo Tianliao asked with concern, suppressing his laughter.

Tianlang-zhenren paced in a circle, fuming. He raised his hand to hit him again, then thought better of it. Baring his teeth, he hissed, "I can't stop Qingtong if he wants to keep you by his side, but he's weak now. Don't let him fight, and never let him cultivate to the next stage."

With a damaged divine soul, the soul transformation stage was his limit. He wouldn't survive a heavenly tribulation.

"I understand." Mo Tianliao frowned. "His divine soul should still be on me. Is there any way for me to return it to him?"

Tianlang paused and scrutinized Mo Tianliao's expression. He didn't seem to be faking it… "You think splitting a divine soul is so easy?" Tianlang snorted. "You *can* do it, if you want to become an idiot."

Mo Tianliao's divine soul wasn't a spirit soul; it couldn't withstand a split. And even if he managed to do it, there was no guarantee the part of Qingtong's divine soul could be returned to the rightful owner. Tianlang told Mo Tianliao that soul-splitting was a forbidden art, and their knowledge of it was incomplete. Qingtong had been taking an enormous risk when he attempted it, with no idea whether he would fail or succeed.

Finally, Tianlang made Mo Tianliao swear a simple blood oath not to reveal the secrets he'd seen in the sect and stormed off in a huff.

Mo Tianliao stood in the courtyard for a long time, slowly clenching his fists. So what if it was a forbidden art? He would find a way to cure Qingtong, even if he had to travel to the ends of the earth.

He returned to the room, and the tiger looked up at him in silence.

Patting the tiger on the head, Mo Tianliao looked at the man on the bed. Qingtong wasn't asleep, and he opened his eyes when he sensed his presence.

"Does it still hurt?" Mo Tianliao asked softly.

Qingtong ignored him and tried to prop himself up.

"Don't move." Mo Tianliao reached out to support him. "Just tell me what you need. I'll get it for you."

Qingtong pushed him away. "I want to sit in the sun."

The tiger roared. *Shizun, I'll carry you on my back.*

“You’re finally willing to talk to me.” Mo Tianliao smiled as he picked up the struggling Qingtong in his arms and headed for the courtyard. The disgruntled tiger followed behind and tried to bite him on the butt: *I’m usually the one carrying Shizun!*

The spring sunshine shone down on the bamboo rocking chair, pleasant and warm. Mo Tianliao played with Qingtong’s left hand. His fingers were long, slender, and fair, but the palm was pink, just like those soft paw pads. It made him want to take a bite. He was just raising the hand to his mouth when he felt a chill, and he looked up to meet a pair of cold, beautiful eyes staring at him. For a moment, his heart stopped.

How could he have forgotten that the person before him now wasn’t his cat but his beautiful Shizun?!

Sheepishly, he put his master’s hand back, instead stroking the bracelet with two fingers. The gems glittered brilliantly in the sunlight. “I’ve lost mine somewhere. Maybe you can stop wearing this now.”

This bracelet was one of a pair; Mo Tianliao had a similar, albeit wider, bracer. His physical body had been obliterated back in the Annihilation Valley, but his bracer should have survived; he just didn’t know who’d taken it.

Qingtong pulled his hand back and looked down in silence.

“All right, all right. I won’t interfere.” Mo Tianliao smiled. “I’m planning to go out for a while—”

“Whatever for?” said Qingtong, looking up at him.

With his Pawpaw, Mo Tianliao could prattle on and on for as long as he pleased, but looking at his master always made him think twice about acting so casually around him. It was as if they were getting to know each

other all over again. There was a weird sense of unfamiliarity along with their unbreakable closeness.

“For training, and to find Taishi.” Mo Tianliao dragged over a bamboo stool and sat by the rocking chair. Taishi was the name he had given to the divine artifact he had yet to complete.

“That old garbage?” Qingtong frowned. His disdain for the unfinished divine artifact was obvious. If it hadn’t been for that menace, this dumbass wouldn’t have been hunted down by millions of people and ended up being obliterated. He’d finally returned to life, so why seek that troublemaker again?

Mo Tianliao smiled. He knew his cat wasn’t fond of Taishi. “It’s useful,” he replied. He wasn’t looking for the divine artifact so he could rule the world or seek vengeance. Those were secondary. If he wanted to cure his cat, however, he *had* to find Taishi.

It was widely believed that divine artifacts held the title of “divine” for just their destructive power, but in fact, that wasn’t true. The reason magical and spiritual artifacts were “artifacts” to be used by people was that they lacked spiritual intelligence. Even celestial artifacts were controlled by humans. Only divine artifacts developed their own spiritual intelligence, surpassing the limits of their “artifact” nature.

And the spiritual intelligence of a divine artifact was formed of the natural world over millennia. As such, these artifacts were privy to knowledge that the average person wasn’t. Mo Tianliao had to find that thing, complete the final step of the refining, and make it tell him the way to repair a divine soul.

But Qingtong mercilessly poured cold water on his convictions. “You’ve only just established your foundation. You’ll be just courting death if you look for it.”

Any magical artifacts forged by Lord Duantian would trigger a mad scramble for them once they appeared. Price wasn’t the only constraint; some of them were unattainable even if you had the money, especially that divine artifact that had led to his demise. Every time it appeared, bloodshed would follow.

Mo Tianliao smiled. He naturally had his own way of getting it back.

Hearing this, the tiger clung to Qingtong’s leg and bobbed his head. *Shizun, let me go with Shidi. I promise I’ll bring him back in one piece.*

Qingtong swatted the tiger’s head aside. “I’ll go with you,” he said coldly, glaring at Mo Tianliao with contempt. His meaning was clear: *You’ll probably end up blasted to smithereens again if I’m not there*.

After a stunned moment, the corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips curved into a smile. “All right.”

MINI EXTRA

Woozy Sect’s Gossip Weekly Special: Interview with Qingtong-zhenren

Reporter Tiger: Where did you first meet Woodworker?

Guest Appearance Qingtong: By the river.

Reporter Tiger: Did he save you after you tried to end it all over relationship problems?

Guest Appearance Qingtong: I was just catching fish.

Reporter Tiger: …I heard the sect leader has agreed to your relationship. Is that right?

Guest Appearance Qingtong: Why would that dumb dog's opinion matter to me?

Reporter Tiger: …So that means you have the parents' blessings!

Guest Appearance Qingtong: *smacks him* Watch your words!

Reporter Tiger: You may not hit reporters during interviews!

Guest Appearance Qingtong: *flashes claws* Say that again?

Reporter Tiger: You may hit reporters during interviews… QAQ

Chapter 33:
Going Out

THE TIGER CLUNG PERSISTENTLY to his master's legs: *Let me tag along too. Neither of you know the way.* He couldn't help worrying about these two—one had only just established his foundation, and the other's divine soul was damaged.

When he heard the tiger's whimpering, Mo Tianliao's curiosity was piqued. "What is he saying?"

He'd assumed at first that the tiger was his master's soul beast, but he now knew his master was Pawpaw, and a spirit beast couldn't possibly have signed a blood pact with another spirit beast. Looking at the tiger thoughtfully, Mo Tianliao patted it on the head.

After a moment of silence, Qingtong said, "He wants to tag along."

Mo Tianliao shook his head. "That won't do. He's a high-level spirit beast who has yet to sign a blood pact." High-level spirit beasts were highly sought after by high-level cultivators, and taking this fellow out would trigger a fight no less intense than the scramble for that half-baked divine artifact of his.

The tiger stiffened. He'd forgotten he was in his spirit beast form. Of course his junior wouldn't agree. But his junior had just patted him on his head, so it would be weird to reveal his identity now…

For a moment, the atmosphere was awkward. The tiger hung his head and ran off.

Watching the tiger’s retreating back, Mo Tianliao quirked a smile and poured some tea from a nearby teapot. Then he poured it back and forth between two cups until the water had cooled slightly, before offering it to his master with an ingratiating smile.

Qingtong accepted it and took a sip. “Out with it. What do you want?” Whenever Mo Tianliao wore this expression, he wanted to either rub his belly or touch his tail.

“Lend me some money,” Mo Tianliao said shamelessly.

A glimmer of surprise flashed in Qingtong’s beautiful eyes. This guy was actually asking him for money? “How much?” He snorted.

Mo Tianliao made a rough calculation. “About fifty thousand high-grade spiritual stones.”

“Fifty thousand can’t get you that garbage.” Qingtong sneered. That worthless artifact was good for nothing except stirring up trouble, but there was no lack of fools in the cultivation world.

“I know.” Mo Tianliao certainly wasn’t such a sucker that he’d pay money for his own creations. “Just lend it to me. I’ll pay you back later.” It was honestly embarrassing to have to borrow money from his own cat. He *could* save up the funds through artifact forging, but Qingtong’s condition didn’t give him the luxury of time. It was imperative he find Taishi as soon as possible.

“You’re my human, so it’s only right for me to support you.” Qingtong pulled out an inventory pouch from his inventory bracelet and threw it in Mo Tianliao’s face.

Mo Tianliao was so stunned by the phrase “my human” that the pouch hit him squarely in the face. Catching the pouch, he noticed his

master’s matter-of-fact expression and realized he meant “my human” the same way Mo Tianliao meant “my cat.” For a moment, he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

After an entire afternoon of chatting and sunning himself with his master, the subtle sense of unfamiliarity between them had vanished.

“Oh, right. I braided some hemp ropes at Woxuan Sanctum today and made them into a ball for you.” Mo Tianliao handed him the ball.

“So ugly.” Qingtong accepted it disdainfully and poked it with a finger.

“It’s for you to sharpen your claws,” Mo Tianliao said with a smile. Looking at those fair, delicate fingertips, he couldn’t resist squeezing them. “Do you still remember the scratching post I made you from that legendary Tree of Life?”

“Yeah.” Qingtong pulled his hand away, tossed the ball into his inventory bracelet, and continued to bask in the sun with his eyes half closed.

“I’ll buy another piece of wood some other day.” Mo Tianliao propped his chin on his hand and looked quietly at the beautiful man in front of him. He’d always talked to Pawpaw in the past, and he had always hoped the cat would someday be able to turn human and answer him. He hadn’t expected the day to come so fast.

“No need for that.” Those cold eyes swept over Mo Tianliao’s body. Sure, that legendary tree was a divine tree, too, but it didn’t feel as good to scratch as the undying tree.

Just seeing that look in the cat’s eyes made Mo Tianliao’s arms ache. Fortunately, those eyes didn’t linger on him for long before they misted

over. Qingtong yawned elegantly and closed his eyes.

Although Mo Tianliao wanted to continue chatting, he made the wise decision to sit quietly until Qingtong had drifted off into sleep. Then, at last, he took Qingtong's hand in his own.

He couldn't believe those soft pink paw pads had turned into such pretty hands. He still remembered the first time he'd tried to trim Pawpaw's claws. He had been so nervous that he'd drawn blood, and the sight of the little paw bleeding made Mo Tianliao's heart ache so badly he wanted to slap himself. From that day forth, he no longer dared to cut the cat's claws —and so he ended up being scratched almost every day.

Evening was fast approaching, and the temperature would drop as the night drew in. But the man in the rocking chair showed no sign of waking up; in fact, he would probably sleep for a few more hours. After a moment's hesitation, Mo Tianliao picked him up in his arms.

As he expected, the man didn't wake. He continued to sleep peacefully in his arms. Mo Tianliao huffed out an amused breath and carried him into the inner chamber.

There were some things he'd have to prepare for his long journey, but since he was the one handling the realm affairs now, he had access to everything he needed. It would have been no big deal if he were traveling alone, but he was taking his master with him, so everything from food to clothing and accommodations had to be meticulously prepared.

He had the attendants prepare his master's usual utensils, his bedding, and several sets of outfits, then had the Chamber of Administrative Affairs purchase some daily necessities. When he had the time, Mo Tianliao

personally went down the mountain to buy some materials to craft some useful magical artifacts as a contingency.

The Auspicious Bazaar didn't sell a lot of materials for crafting and refining, but they did have luminous stones. Mo Tianliao bought a high-grade fire jade, some luminous stones, and a piece of auspicious crystal.

The luminous stones allowed an artifact to be controlled by the divine soul, while the ruyi crystal enabled them to change size. Of course, these were only the most basic materials. Objects crafted from this ruyi crystal were limited to two fixed forms and couldn't undergo additional transformations.

Mo Tianliao rented a premium fire chamber to refine the ruyi crystal and the luminous stones. Meanwhile, he repeatedly tempered the fire jade with his woodfire to remove any impurities.

The fire jade, originally vivid red, gradually turned a shade of green as it was permeated by the woodfire. He then merged it with the refined luminous stones and inscribed a complex spirit connection spell array into it.

Due to the rapid resolidification of the stone liquid during the process, the average artificer typically only had time to inscribe one spirit connection spell array to make the magical artifact responsive to the divine soul's commands, turning it into a treasure artifact. Additional functions would require additional materials to be engraved. Mo Tianliao, however, inscribed more than a dozen arrays in a row, from transformation to spirit connection, from flight to fire invocation, and so on.

His fingers flew in a blur. These spell arrays were best inscribed using luminous stones, as they could be activated directly without going

through a spirit connection array, making the process much faster. However, this method was beyond the ability of most ordinary artificers.

He sculpted the fire jade, inscribed with countless spell arrays, into a long sword. Then, he dipped his fingers, wrapped in spiritual energy, into the molten ruyi crystal and quickly drew a spatial array on the blade. Afterward, he held the sword between his palms and recited an incantation, shrinking it to the size of his palm to resemble a sword-shaped jade hairpin.

The ability to change size upgraded this from a treasure artifact to a spiritual artifact, which meant Mo Tianliao could store it in his core. But Taishi was so domineering that it might refuse to acknowledge him as its master if there were other spiritual artifacts in his core, so Mo Tianliao decided against storing it in his body. Instead, he used the remaining fragments of the fire jade to sculpt a palm-size sheath for the mini sword and used it as a hairpin on his crown.

When he returned to his courtyard, Mo Tianliao was so exhausted from the days of forging that he fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. In his dreams, he felt like he was wearing a fur collar, and it made him so warm he was sweating. The next day, he woke up to see the snow-white furball perched on his pillow, pawing at the hairpin on his head. His once tidy hair was now so tousled it looked like a bird’s nest.

“Pawpaw.” He leaned in for a kiss and was promptly rewarded with a slap: *Insolent disciple! What are you doing?!*

Stunned, Mo Tianliao touched his nose. He’d forgotten the little cat was now his master. He could no longer kiss him as he pleased.

MINI EXTRA

Sect Leader: From now on, do you take him as your human, for richer or for poorer, be he man or tree?

Pawpaw: I do.

Sect Leader: From now on, do you take him as your cat, for better or for the worst of scratches and bites, be he man or feline, and willingly serve as his cushion, scratching post, and cat tree, and provide him with coldspring fish and glass beads?

Woodworker: *speechless*

Chapter 34:
Stumbled Upon a Secret

MO TIANLIAO SHEEPISHLY lay back down and turned his head to look at the cat, who was looking right back at him.

White light flashed, revealing a gorgeous man in a flowing white robe lying on his side. Mo Tianliao froze as that exquisite face leaned in close and breathed in his ear. “You’ve been working for days just to refine this?”

“Shizun…” Mo Tianliao felt his throat go dry. Some beautiful faces lost their charm when you saw them up close, but this one grew even more striking the closer it came.

Long fingers reached out to remove the tiny sword made of red jade from the “nest.” “What is this used for?” Qingtong twirled it between his fingers.

“Well, we need a handy weapon when we’re outside.” Mo Tianliao gulped. “It’s nothing special.”

Hearing it was nothing particularly interesting, only a sword for hacking people down, Qingtong lost interest and tossed it aside.

“Shidi!” an enthusiastic voice exclaimed as someone burst through the door. “I—”

The words died on Menghu’s lips. His eyes widened. Wh-wh-wh-what had he just seen?! His own master was lounging on his junior’s bed with his head propped up on his hand, cutting the very image of a fallen

immortal. And his handsome junior, with clothes in disarray and disheveled hair, looking utterly exhausted…

Mo Tianliao narrowed his eyes. Before he fell asleep last night, he'd activated the protective barrier. He could understand his master having access; after all, he was the owner of this place. But what about his senior?

The protective barrier here was meant to prevent fellow disciples from disrupting the person cultivating within, but if it couldn't keep his senior out, that left him with only one explanation. This barrier was similar to the protective barrier on the back mountain: It could keep people out, but not spirit beasts.

"Oh, Sh-Shizun is here too." Menghu scratched his head and laughed awkwardly. He'd stumbled upon a scandalous secret, and now he really was going to be turned into a tiger-skin rug!

Qingtong couldn't be bothered with this silly disciple. He transformed into a white cat, jumped onto Mo Tianliao's chest, and licked his paws.

The corner of Mo Tianliao's mouth twitched. How was he supposed to sit up with His Feline Lordship perching on his chest? He couldn't very well talk to his senior lying down, could he? Cradling the cat on his chest, Mo Tianliao sat up and moved the cat to his lap. "What can I do for you?"

"Uh, aren't you going out for training? I'm worried you won't know the way, so I'm considering going with you." Menghu found the words difficult to say now that he knew the "truth." He really wanted to lie, but he simply couldn't bring himself to lie to his master.

What could he say? *"I want to grill meat with you on the back mountain"*? He wouldn't stay alive for much longer if he disturbed his

master for something so trivial!

Mo Tianliao's plan was supposed to be secretive. The fewer people who knew, the better. He was about to decline, but he changed his mind when he saw his senior's expression all but screaming: *I take back my words; I don't actually want to go.* "Sure. I really don't know the way, anyway."

Over three centuries had passed, and the balance between the orthodox and unorthodox sects had shifted significantly, so it wouldn't actually be a bad idea to let Menghu tag along.

As events had proven, his senior was actually useful.

When he heard that Mo Tianliao wanted to visit the largest marketplace of the orthodox sects, he immediately went to the sect's Chamber of Administrative Affairs to rent a flying ship. To Mo Tianliao, it was crudely made and slow as a turtle, but it was at least better than flying on a sword.

Flying ships could be powered by a cultivator's spiritual energy or by spiritual stones. Cultivators usually didn't use their spiritual power for this, though, since it was far more draining than flying on a sword was.

Tianlang-zhenren glared at Mo Tianliao. "Where are you taking him this time?"

The white cat lazily poked his head out of Mo Tianliao's collar and yawned. Then, smacking his lips, he glanced at his own senior and went back to sleep. The sect leader's face grew even darker.

"Just buying some stuff." Mo Tianliao's lips curled up as he tried not to show his smugness on his face. "We'll be back soon. Hold on to this if you're still worried." He handed the sect leader a jade tally.

This was a spirit connection magical artifact he'd crafted himself. There were two of them, and if one was shattered, the other would shatter too; it would even transmit a message at the moment of breakage, reaching across tens of thousands of miles. It was the perfect device for requesting help in times of emergency.

"If he's hurt even the slightest bit, I'll bite—ahem, tear your head off!" The sect leader bared his teeth and put away the jade tally. Then he slapped the obediently waiting Menghu on the back. "That applies to you too. Do you hear me?!"

Finally, they managed to break free from their naggy sect leader. With spiritual stones embedded in all four corners of its spell array, the flying ship slowly rose into the air and headed in the direction the passengers indicated.

"Six Harmonies Bazaar is in Tongtian City," Menghu said from the front, where he was steering the ship. "It's about nine thousand miles away from here."

"Is that so…?" Mo Tianliao absentmindedly said as he stroked the cat nestling against his chest. But the cat felt it wasn't quite warm enough; he tugged Mo Tianliao's inner robe open and snuggled closer against its soft lining.

Mo Tianliao still couldn't believe he was cradling his master in his arms. He'd assumed that his master would refuse to be carried around like this now that Mo Tianliao knew who he really was. But everything was still the same, even after he changed into a cat. Mo Tianliao heaved a sigh of relief, an indescribable sense of satisfaction welling up in him. *Look! My shizun is in my arms!*

This strange, somewhat embarrassing feeling gave Mo Tianliao an inexplicable thrill.

Menghu glanced at his junior cradling their master, and silently looked away again. Noticing his lonely senior, Mo Tianliao raised his eyebrows and suppressed a mischievous smile as he went over to sit with him.

“So, which was more delicious the other day? The mutton or the venison?”

“Venison,” Menghu answered without thinking. As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he froze. The day before, he’d been basking in the sun on the steps in front of Qingning Palace in his tiger form when Mo Tianliao ran over, called him Chubby, and gave him a grilled leg of mutton and a grilled leg of venison. He stiffly turned his head and met his junior’s smiling eyes.

Mo Tianliao sighed. “We’re brothers, but you’re still keeping secrets from me. Do you not trust me?” As he spoke, he extended a hand and turned it into wood.

“You—” Menghu started.

Mo Tianliao winked. “I’m a spirit cultivator too. Why else would Shizun accept me as a disciple?”

Menghu understood now. He slapped him hard on the back. “You should have said so earlier! You gave me a fright.”

Now that he’d gained his senior’s trust, Mo Tianliao wasted no time prying for information. The simple-minded tiger was no match for a cunning old devil like Mo Tianliao, and soon enough he’d spilled everything. He had just been a tiger cub with extraordinary aptitude when

their master brought him back to Woqing Sanctum and gave him the nickname Chubby—because he was round and chubby.

“So how did you come to be called Menghu?” Mo Tianliao asked with a serious expression.

Menghu indignantly explained that their master had kept calling him Chubby even when he’d grown up, so he’d come up with the name Menghu himself. Spirits had no surnames. Being a fierce tiger, he thought the name, which sounded exactly like *fierce tiger*, suited him perfectly.

Mo Tianliao nodded in understanding. “Then Moxiong must be a black bear, like his name suggests?” he probed. Moxiong and Langzi were the two fellow disciples he had yet to meet, so if he used Moxiong as an example, Menghu wouldn’t be able to tell that he couldn’t determine a spirit cultivator’s original form—for all Menghu knew, he was just curious.

“Yeah! I was the one who gave him that name!” Menghu said proudly. “Originally the sect leader called him Big Guy.”

Mo Tianliao lowered his eyes to hide his surprise. When he’d found out about his master’s real identity, he’d been worried that his secret could be exposed and his cat would be in danger. Later, he’d realized there was no need for concern since the sect leader was aware and could cover it up and protect him. And now it seemed like Woyun Sect was actually made up of spirit cultivators…

In Taixuan, “spirit cultivators” mostly referred to spirit beasts who had cultivated into human forms. Those who had signed a blood pact and evolved into human form at their masters’ sides, though, weren’t called spirit cultivators but soul beasts. In the eyes of cultivators, spirit beasts who had signed blood pacts were still beasts, no matter their cultivation level.

Meanwhile, spirit beasts who cultivated human forms without a blood pact were something of a legend on Taixuan. Cultivators believed that spirit beasts didn't have the intelligence to comprehend cultivation methods on their own without the assistance of a blood pact, and so it was impossible for them to evolve into human forms. Evolved spirit beasts hiding among humans would naturally conceal their identities, and given the limitations of cultivators' divine souls, they wouldn't be able to discern a spirit cultivator's true identity.

Mo Tianliao rapidly processed all this information. To sum it up, Woyun Sect—one of the three great orthodox sects—was actually a sanctuary for spirit beasts, where they could freely cultivate and evolve into human form. And before he met him, Pawpaw had grown up in this sect.

Listening to their conversation from Mo Tianliao's arms, the white cat rolled his eyes. His eldest disciple was really an idiot! He wouldn't even notice if Mo Tianliao sold him off at an auction someday.

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TONGTIAN CITY was situated at the summit of a mountain, standing at a height that almost reached the sky. It was most prosperous city among the orthodox sects, and home to the biggest trading marketplace, the Six Harmonies Bazaar. Virtually any elixirs or materials could be purchased here, and even top-tier spirit beasts would pop up at the auctions from time to time.

The city was divided into two zones—streets where cultivators could freely set up stalls and the Six Harmonies Bazaar. The bazaar itself was further organized into various streets, each lined with rows of stalls that specialized in specific wares. The street that sold materials for artifact forging had a dizzying assortment of shops of all sizes.

“Are you buying materials for refining artifacts?” All the shops looked the same to Menghu, who was clueless about this stuff, so he made to lead them to the biggest store. But Mo Tianliao grabbed Menghu to stop him.

Large stores that sold everything tended to be expensive, whereas specialized shops yielded the best quality. The shop specializing in ores would offer the best meteoric iron, while the shop specializing in crystals would have superior crystals.

Mo Tianliao dragged his poor, dizzy senior, overwhelmed by the massive variety of products, into each shop for a look, and under Menghu’s pained gaze, he splurged twenty thousand high-grade spiritual stones on some high-quality luminous stones and Xuanyuan Iron.

Mo Tianliao stopped in front of a shop selling rare stones. “Shopkeeper, do you happen to have any Meteorfall Stone?”

The shopkeeper glanced at Mo Tianliao and saw a cultivator in the foundation establishment stage. “Young man, are you forging something? If you want to craft a size-changing magical artifact, you can just buy some ruyi crystal.”

Mo Tianliao smiled. “It’s for my shizun.”

The shopkeeper dropped his dismissive attitude at once. Anyone who needed Meteorfall Stone must have been crafting spiritual artifacts, and

only a master artificer would do that. “Meteorfall Stone is too precious to sell in a small store like mine,” he said. “But I heard the auction house has a precious material for auction these days. You can try your luck there.”

MINI EXTRA

Eldest Shixiong: What a waste, spending so much money on some fancy rocks.

Woodworker: It’s just chump change, actually.

Eldest Shixiong: Seriously?

Woodworker: Yeah, about a mountain’s worth of mutton leg.

Eldest Shixiong: QAQ

Chapter 35:
Six Harmonies

"SHIDI, why are you buying such expensive raw materials?" Menghu looked at the chunk of pitch-black iron in Mo Tianliao's hands.

The luminous stone wasn't really expensive, since it was needed for crafting treasure artifacts and above, but Xuanyuan Iron was a different story. Rumor had it that Xuanyuan Iron was the raw material used to craft the ancient divine artifact, the Xuanyuan Sword. The ore was sold by weight, and its price was comparable to that of high-quality crystals. Mo Tianliao had purchased a thousand catties of Xuanyuan Iron at once.

"A fist-sized amount of Xuanyuan Iron ore can only yield this much iron." Mo Tianliao showed him his fingernail. "To gather enough for one artifact, you need at least a thousand catties." And this was assuming minimal waste. If the artificer had poor skills, a thousand catties would probably only be enough to craft a dagger.

Menghu gaped—that wasn't why he was asking!

Mo Tianliao was in a good mood, and so he'd explained the intricacies of forging to his senior in a rare display of patience. Alas, Menghu didn't seem to understand. Mo Tianliao shook his head and headed for the auction house.

The auction house in Six Harmonies Bazaar was called the Six Harmonies Auction House—the largest among the orthodox sects. Jointly managed by the three great sects, it was safe, reliable, and offered fair prices. As it was a major auction house, the items for auction were all

meticulously screened; anything that failed to make the grade wouldn't be accepted. Unlike smaller auction houses that operated every other day, the Six Harmonies Auction House held an auction only once every week.

Located in the heart of the city, the auction house was encircled by a towering wall made of blackgold stone about a hundred feet tall. Flanking the grand entrance were two vividly carved black jade dragons, with scales forming complex array patterns.

"The auction will be held the day after tomorrow. Feel free to see if there's anything you need here." The attendant at the door smiled and gestured to the black wall on the right side of the entrance; it was inscribed with words formed with gold dust that could be wiped off and rewritten again.

Apart from the three treasures that were the highlights of the auction, the others had been listed out here. There was a dazzling array of superior-grade spiritual artifacts, high-grade elixirs, thousand-year-old spiritual herbs, and rare raw materials. It was enough to excite any craftsman, but unfortunately, there was no Meteorfall Stone listed.

"Is there any material for artifact forging among the three highlights?" Mo Tianliao asked the attendant.

"I'm not privy to the specifics, but we did indeed receive an extremely rare forging material a few days ago. I'm not sure if it'll be up for auction this time," the attendant said mysteriously, covering his mouth, although his voice was loud enough to be overheard by everyone around them and build suspense.

Mo Tianliao nodded and led his senior away from the crowd.

“Shidi, why don’t we check out the cultivators’ stalls?” Menghu suggested.

“We’re even less likely to find them there. Let’s try our luck tomorrow at the auction.” Mo Tianliao nonchalantly walked into a restaurant. There was going to be a rare forging material, so he’d check it out. Even if it wasn’t Meteorfall Stone, a substitute material would work too.

The restaurant was quiet, with only a few tables of pretentious customers drinking tea. Among the orthodox sects, most cultivators at the foundation establishment stage preferred taking inedia pills so they could save time for cultivating, and those who had reached the inedia stage didn’t eat at all.

Traditional cultivation methods stressed the need for self-restraint in one’s cultivation. The old saying warned about excessive sensory indulgence: The five colors blind the eyes, the five tones deafen the ears, and the five tastes dull the palate.[7] The orthodox sects therefore believed that they should be pure of heart and free of desires, and avoid getting entrapped by worldly possessions and secular attachments.

In contrast, the unorthodox sects advocated following one’s heart. Human relationships, as well as the desires that arose from the five senses, were a part of human nature, and suppressing them would only drive you mad. Excessive restrictions were counterproductive, and it was better to maintain a balance. By keeping true to one’s nature, one could achieve enlightenment.

This was one of the things Mo Tianliao appreciated about the unorthodox sects. The act of seeking immortality was in itself defying

heaven’s will, so all that rhetoric about restraint was bullshit. You needed a great deal of faith to overcome the hardship and obstacles of cultivation; more faith than the average person possessed. And this faith in itself was rooted in desire. The hypocritical orthodox cultivators preached compassion, but the sordid deeds they carried out in secret were no less vile than those of demonic cultivators.

Mo Tianliao ordered a spread of delicacies. “Waiter, do you have coldspring fish?”

“Are you talking about the variety of fish from superior cold springs?” the waiter asked, having served a diverse range of customers over the years. “Unfortunately, we don’t have it here. But we do serve the icelake fish unique to the outskirts of Tongtian City. Would you like to try it?”

Mo Tianliao nodded and paid him with spiritual stones. He also ordered roasted highland curved-horn sheep. The other patrons at the neighboring tables watched disdainfully as dish after dish was served, making snide remarks about this uncouth bunch.

A young cultivator in white curled his lips in contempt. “How vulgar.”

“They’re probably from some isolated small sect and have never seen the world,” a cultivator in blue said in hushed tones.

Naturally, a demon lord with a powerful divine soul and two spirit cultivators with keen hearing could hear everything clearly. But Mo Tianliao had always been thick-skinned, so he paid no mind to the idle chatter. Instead, he focused on deboning the fish for his cat and placing its meat into the frost jade bowl.

When he smelled the fish, the white cat poked his little head out and sniffed. Then he jumped onto the table, stretching elegantly, before pulling the jade bowl closer to dig in.

Mo Tianliao pinched the cat's left paw and rotated the bracelet. He'd just remembered he'd inscribed an aura-concealing spell array on this bracelet when he made it, which could hide Pawpaw's spirit beast aura. As long as no one probed with their divine sense, they would just see an ordinary kitten. He'd been a demon lord for so many years that he'd never had to worry about anyone trying to steal his spirit beast, so he'd forgotten all about this spell array.

Menghu glared at the gossiping patrons, unleashing his intimidating aura as a core formation cultivator, and the foundation establishment cultivators promptly behaved themselves. They'd only focused on how unsophisticated these people were—they hadn't expected them to possess such high cultivation. They couldn't afford to offend them. The oppressive pressure didn't let up, and some of the gossipers broke into a sweat and stood up to apologize.

Just then, the roasted curved-horn sheep was served, its aroma permeating the air. The oppressive aura weighing down on those people instantly disappeared as this senior at the core formation stage grabbed the entire sheep and began scarfing it down with relish.

The cultivators shrank back, threw down some spiritual stones to pay their bill, and left, fearing they might say something inappropriate again if they stayed.

One man and two beasts feasted and enjoyed themselves at Six Harmonies Bazaar for an entire day, until the auction house opened the

following day.

Seating at the Six Harmonies Auction House was arranged based on the guests' cultivation level. No matter how wealthy a foundation establishment cultivator was, he could only purchase a red wooden token for a seat in the main hall. Core formation cultivators received yellow wooden tokens for seats on the second floor, while nascent soul cultivators were given blue wooden tokens for the third floor, and so on.

The entrance tokens weren't expensive—they were all priced the same. Even if you had the money, you couldn't access the private rooms if you didn't meet the cultivation requirement.

Through the jostling crowd strolled a figure in a snow-white robe, woven from high-quality merfolk silk. His ink-black hair cascaded over his shoulders, adorned only with a crystal-clear glass hairpin. His face was obscured by a light veil, revealing only his cold eyes, so beautiful they took everyone's breath away.

This exquisite man looked up, radiating a powerful aura.

The queuing crowd quickly made way. The attendant at the door presented a tray of tokens. Slender fingers swept over them, and the white wooden token for soul transformation cultivators lit up and sprang into his hand. The crowd gasped—a soul transformation cultivator!

Everyone carefully stopped staring at him as the attendant led him into the private room on the fourth floor, leaving the crowd to breathe a collective sigh of relief in their wake. The gorgeous man strolled in, followed by two tall attendants—Mo Tianliao and Menghu.

The materials they wanted to buy were too valuable to be purchased by a foundation establishment cultivator like Mo Tianliao—that would only

draw unwanted attention, so they decided to let their master do the honors.

There were only three private rooms on the fourth floor, and each one was extremely spacious. A large plush couch dominated the center, with a low crystal table laden with spiritual fruits and tea. A transparent orb sat beside the couch, flashing occasionally.

“If you see something you like, just place your hand on the crystal orb and bid using your divine will.” The attendant explained the bidding process with a smile, but Qingtong impatiently waved him away.

Once the attendant had left, Qingtong took off his veil and reclined lazily on the couch. Menghu circled the room, but there was no seat other than the couch, so he tried to squeeze onto the edge beside his master, only to be slapped to the floor. In the end, he transformed into a tiger and curled up miserably on the footrest.

Mo Tianliao looked sympathetically at his senior and walked over to sit on the footrest, leaning against the furry tiger like it was the most natural thing in the world.

MINI EXTRA

Six Harmonies Anecdotes: Third Month Issue

Cover Page: Stunning Beauty Appears at Six Harmonies Bazaar (Candid Shot Included)

Feature Interview: Six Harmonies Auction House’s Secret to Success —The Bigger the Hype, the Better the Sales

Street Snap: Two Men One Cat with Uncouth Table Manners. Small Sect’s Future in Doubt.

Woodworker: This sort of backwater tabloid is really trashy.

Shizun: Indeed. *holding the rolled-up magazine*

Woodworker: *speechless*

Chapter 36:
Meteorfall Stone

THE VENUE WAS SHAPED like a semicircle, completed with a large stage on the first floor. Since cultivators had excellent eyesight, the treasures were laid out flat on the stage, so those on the fourth floor actually had the best view of the items.

The auction hadn't begun yet, so musicians were performing on the stage in the interim. These low-level cultivators posed no threat and were average in appearance, but their music was pleasant to the ear.

The seven-stringed qin rang out, at times stirring and impassioned like the shattering of a silver vase, at others gentle and melodious like a murmuring stream. The flute's notes were slow and lingering, joined by the occasional tinkling of bells, as if narrating an ancient tale. Listening intently with eyes closed, the audience could visualize a beauty with tiny silver bells around their fair ankles strolling barefoot across a boundless ancient desert, walking across yellow sands toward the lake in the far distance. Spring waters suddenly gushed forth, engulfing the desert and transforming the barren landscape into one teeming with life.

Mo Tianliao opened his eyes and frowned. The music had a sort of bewitching power—not enough to harm, because the performers were low-level cultivators, but sufficient to rouse latent desires within the listeners, ensuring the bidding later would be lively. Beauty, ankles, bells—these had been the most vivid images in his mind earlier, which meant… He slowly turned to see that his master had already taken off his shoes and was stepping barefoot on the tiger's head, his fair feet buried in the thick fur. Mo

Tianliao felt his nose itch a little. He had always carried Pawpaw around, since the cat was too lazy to walk, so the paws had always been soft and pink…

His hand had only just touched his master's calf when the fair foot gave him a light kick in return. Fighting the impulse to grab Qingtong's foot, Mo Tianliao tucked his hands into his sleeves and looked at him.

"Tea." Qingtong, reclining against a cushion, tilted his head at Mo Tianliao.

By default this room came with an attendant, but he had withdrawn on seeing that this zhenren had brought his own attendants along. Menghu was currently serving as a footrest, so naturally it was Mo Tianliao's turn to be ordered around.

Resigned to his duty, Mo Tianliao stood up and poured tea for his master. The teapot on the table came with brewed aromatic tea that was kept warm with fire crystals, so it was always hot whenever they needed a drink. Mo Tianliao glanced down at the hall as he poured the tea. The venue was quickly filling up. The cultivators on the various floors couldn't see each other, but they could view the main hall. The cultivators at the foundation establishment stage and below in the main hall didn't have divine souls, so if they wanted to bid, they had to shout out their offer. For that reason, they couldn't buy any valuable items. After all, everyone was watching—and listening—and if everyone knew what they'd bought they might get robbed once they stepped out of the auction house with their treasures.

After about half an hour, the music finally stopped. The illumination stones were covered with dark veils, and the curtain fell, revealing a stage

inlaid with sunstones that shone so brightly it was impossible to look away. A core formation cultivator with an honest face stood in the center of the stage, smiling amicably as he cupped his hands at the audience. “Greetings to my fellow cultivators and seniors. I’m Liuhecai. It’s my honor to be here with all of you for today’s auction…”

“All the auctioneers at Six Harmonies Auction House are called Liuhecai,” Mo Tianliao commented as he handed the cooled tea to Qingtong. H e’d brought his cat to Six Harmonies Bazaar before, and the auctioneer had also called himself Liuhecai, even though he was a different man from the one today.

Qingtong took the cup. “So?”

Mo Tianliao blinked and smiled. “Nothing. Would you like some fried fish? As I recall, you love the fried fish here.” Back then, this little furball had spent all his time snoozing in Mo Tianliao’s arms. Why would he care about who the auctioneer was? At best, all he’d remember was what tasted good.

As expected, Qingtong’s eyes lit up at the mention of food. The tiger looked up and roared, too, only to be swatted by his master.

Small fried fish and roast venison legs were soon served to the private room on the highest floor. As the three of them munched away noisily, they missed the first auction item—an opener where the auction house would forgo their usual commission regardless of price. The atmosphere quickly grew lively.

Treasure artifacts, elixirs, and spiritual herbs of increasingly high grade went up for auction in turn. The two men and the tiger cared little for the first few items…at least, until the fifth one came around.

“The Moonslayer Blade—a superior-grade treasure artifact!” The auctioneer pulled back the red silk to unveil a vivid red broadsword carved with a tiger head, gleaming with what seemed to be flames dancing along its surface. “Just so you know, this blade was forged by the Venerable Lord Duantian himself!”

“Whoa!” A buzz rippled through the audience. Lord Duantian’s creations were works of art that commanded astronomical prices—even the basic magical artifacts he created in passing.

“To be frank, this blade is not one of the Venerable One’s masterpieces, but a work he created in his youth.” The auctioneer gestured for the crowd to look at the blade’s gleaming body, which was resplendent despite its simplicity. “However, the Venerable One was already renowned during his core formation stage. This superior fire-element treasure artifact was forged as a gift for a friend when Lord Duantian reached the peak of the core formation stage. One slash can cleave through miles of glacier. The opening bid is a hundred high-grade spiritual stones!”

Typically, the starting bid for an ordinary superior-grade treasure artifact was fifty to eighty high-grade spiritual stones, but since this was a weapon forged by Lord Duantian, the price was significantly higher.

Qingtong took one look at the blade and scoffed.

Mo Tianliao rubbed his nose. It was clear this was his earlier work because the broadsword was still aesthetically pleasing, unlike his later creations, where he’d focused far more on function than appearance. Case in point: the Souleater Banner the Kugu Patriarch had used, which looked like it was cut out of a filthy rag.

The tiger, oblivious to the “charged glances” the two of them were exchanging, stood up when he saw the blade. He set his paw on the crystal orb and placed a bid through his divine sense.

“Shixiong, are you interested in that sword?” Mo Tianliao turned to look at him.

“Rarr!” the tiger said, not caring if his junior understood, and continued bidding for fear of losing the item.

Bids from the private rooms were transmitted through the divine sense via the crystal on stage and announced by the auctioneer. As such, all the Six Harmonies auctioneers had to be at the core formation stage and above.

“One bid upstairs for a hundred and eighty!”

“A hundred and eighty-five!”

“Two hundred!”

The bids rose steadily to two hundred and thirty before slowing to just an increment of one stone at a time. The tiger’s ears were standing at attention, and his tail swept anxiously back and forth across the ground. The price was already two hundred and thirty-six, and he only had two hundred and fifty high-grade spiritual stones on him. He couldn’t afford to go higher.

“One bid upstairs for three hundred high-grade spiritual stones!” the auctioneer suddenly announced.

The entire venue fell silent. Three hundred high-grade spiritual stones could buy three ordinary superior-grade treasure artifacts. This price was truly too exorbitant. The tiger dejectedly removed his paw and returned to lie down on the footrest.

Mo Tianliao patted the tiger on the head. “That blade isn’t anything special. I’ll make you a new one later.” As far as he was concerned, the Moonslayer was basically trash. Other than its fire-elemental offensive power, it had nothing else to offer.

The tiger batted his hand away and bared his fangs at him. *What do you know?! That was a creation of Lord Duantian; it’s more stable than an*

ordinary treasure artifact, and imagine just how prestigious it would be to carry a status symbol like that around! I could flaunt it to Moxiong and the others…

Mo Tianliao didn't know what the tiger was thinking, and he had no intention of lending his senior money to buy trash, so he turned his attention back to the stage.

"I have a set of seven-colored crystals here, each with special attributes that can refine a set of treasure artifacts!" A tray was presented on stage with seven fist-sized crystals in red, orange, yellow, green, cyan, blue, and purple. Rubysmelt Crystal, Ambercloud Crystal, Citrine Sunstone, Jadepine Rosin, Turquoise Skystone, Crystal Sapphire Pearl—the first six were well-known, rare gems, each with their own distinctive use. Just one alone would fetch a handsome sum, and there was a whole set of them here.

"What's that purple stone?" some ignorant cultivator yelled from the audience.

The shout drew Mo Tianliao's attention to the purple crystal. His pupils immediately contracted, and his hand instinctively moved to the orb for bidding.

The auctioneer replied that it was an Amethyst Cloud Crystal, but someone pointed out that Amethyst Cloud Crystal was lighter in color. They couldn't be using it merely to fill out the set, could they? The auctioneer smiled and said nothing. Amethyst Cloud Crystal wasn't a particularly precious crystal, and this one had indeed been added to complete the set. But just the first six alone would fetch a good price, which, shockingly enough, was a thousand top high-grade spiritual stones.

"One thousand one hundred!"

“One thousand two hundred!”

“Two thousand!” This bid was from a nascent soul cultivator upstairs, and it momentarily halted the bidding.

“Thank you, Patriarch,” a pretty female cultivator sitting beside him said with a smile. With this set of crystals, she could find a master artificer to craft a complete set of defensive magical artifacts against all elements, making her capable of withstanding any attacks.

The nascent soul cultivator smiled. What was this bit of money if he could make a pretty lady smile? He could afford it.

“Two thousand and one,” Mo Tianliao bid.

The nascent soul cultivator went red with anger. “Two thousand five hundred!”

Unperturbed, Mo Tianliao raised his bid. “Two thousand five hundred and one.”

Menghu transformed into human form and bared his teeth. “That tray of stones just looks pretty. What do you want them for?”

“To carve a tea set for Shizun,” Mo Tianliao replied casually, and continued bidding.

Menghu almost choked on hearing that. Qingtong scoffed and smacked Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao grinned. Every time the cultivator on the lower floor upped his bid, he would add exactly one more. By six thousand, the other party gave up, and Mo Tianliao won the bid at six thousand and one.

An attendant brought the set to him, and he paid in full on the spot.

Mo Tianliao picked up the last purple crystal and probed it with his divine sense. His lips curved into a smile—he'd been right. This wasn't an Amethyst Cloud Crystal…but a Ninesouls Crystal that could be used to refine soul artifacts!

Qingtong picked up the red gem and turned it around in his hand. "A Meteorfall Stone will cost at least thirty thousand," he said coolly. "How are you going to afford it if it comes up next?"

Mo Tianliao, who had been delighted at the bargain he'd found, immediately stiffened. Now that the first twenty-three items were sold, they unveiled the first highlight of the auction—an obsidian stone with a vast, unfathomable interior, its exterior aglow with a glittering blue light that resembled the stars falling from the heavens. It was the Meteorfall Stone he needed!

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: QAQ It's hard being broke.

Shizun: Beg me, and I'll give you money.

Woodworker: *buries face in belly fur* Oh, kind sir, please take pity on me.

Shizun: Insolent disciple! Where do you think you're touching?!

Chapter 37:
Spirit Discipline

EARLIER, when he'd purchased the Xuanyuan Iron and luminous stones, he'd spent a total of nineteen thousand high-grade spiritual stones. Then, he'd spent another six thousand on the set of gems. That was already half of the fifty thousand his master had given him gone.

Holding the Ninesouls Crystal in his hand, though, Mo Tianliao didn't regret his bid. An ordinary high-quality crystal like the Rubysmelt Crystal, which could be used to craft treasure and spiritual artifacts, cost around one to two hundred high-grade spiritual stones. A set of seven selling for two thousand was considered expensive, and he must have looked like a fool to the others for paying six thousand for it. But they weren't aware that this Ninesouls Crystal was even more precious than the Meteorfall Stone.

Soul artifacts were items that could contain either ordinary souls or divine souls. The Souleater Banner that the Kugu Patriarch had begged him to craft was one such soul artifact. A Ninesouls Crystal the size of a fingernail could hold tens of thousands of souls, and it could be forged into a Souleater Banner—a partially celestial artifact. With this fist-sized Ninesouls Crystal, he could even craft something to nurture the divine soul.

"A Meteorfall Stone!" someone below exclaimed in recognition.

Meteorfall Stone was a top-tier crafting material. It had no specific elemental attribute, so spiritual treasures crafted with it could be used by anyone with no issue whatsoever. More importantly, it could accommodate an almost limitless amount of personal power.

Master cultivators above the soul transformation stages rarely used spiritual artifacts because ordinary spiritual artifacts couldn't withstand their immense spiritual energy. Even if they struck with full force, the spiritual power unleashed would be halved, so they might as well deal a direct blow themselves.

"Looks like our fellow cultivator here has recognized it." The auctioneer stood behind the tray to give the audience a clearer look. "This Meteorfall Stone can forge superior-grade spiritual artifacts and even semi-celestial artifacts. It is a top-tier artifact-forging material suitable for soul transformation masters. There aren't many of them in existence in Taixuan. They are truly rare and hard to come by."

Unlike his earlier fast-paced speech meant to whip up excitement among the crowd, his voice this time was slow and unhurried, as if no amount of praise could capture just how precious this Meteorfall Stone was.

It wasn't just artificers seeking forging materials. If a cultivator wanted to ask a high-level artificer to craft a spiritual treasure for them, offering them rare materials was far more effective than giving them spiritual stones. After all, even the most skilled artificers couldn't craft an artifact without quality materials, no matter how much you paid them.

"The opening bid is twenty thousand high-grade spiritual stones!" The auctioneer went straight to the starting bid without further ado.

None of the foundation establishment cultivators in the hall spoke up. Twenty thousand high-grade spiritual stones equaled two million low-grade spiritual stones. Even if they came from a privileged background, this was far beyond their means.

That left only the silent bids through the cultivators' divine senses in the higher floors.

Mo Tianliao stared at the crystal orb as he listened to the auctioneer's announcements of the bids, which quickly soared to twenty-three thousand before tapering off to an increment of a hundred at a time. Even so, the bids kept coming in. Mo Tianliao looked at the pitiful twenty-five thousand left in his inventory pouch and broke into a sweat. He could only hope there were no wealthy bidders among the audience today.

But apparently, he was out of luck. Just as Mo Tianliao offered twenty-four thousand nine hundred, someone countered with twenty-six thousand.

"Shizun…" Left with no choice, Mo Tianliao turned to his cat for money.

"You were the one who asked for fifty thousand." Qingtong looked at him calmly and sipped his tea. He had always disapproved of Mo Tianliao's weakness in the face of quality material. He'd often been so obsessed with crafting artifacts that he'd forgotten to grill fish for him, instead leaving the job to those ugly hags in his demon palace. Truly unforgivable!

"But this was really unexpected…" Mo Tianliao shamelessly tugged on his master's sleeve.

Qingtong pulled his sleeve away. "No money," he said coldly.

Mo Tianliao sighed. Seeing his master closing his eyes and ignoring him, Mo Tianliao had to reluctantly withdraw his hand from the bidding orb. He'd have no choice but to substitute it with other materials. He hoped nothing would go wrong. Thinking about what lay ahead made his head ache.

The auctioneer continued to call out the bids. “Twenty-eight thousand and three hundred high-grade spiritual stones!”

Menghu couldn’t bear seeing his junior looking so pitiful. He moved over to him. “I still have two thousand five hundred left. Would that be enough?”

Mo Tianliao looked up at his simple and honest senior. He felt like patting him on the head.

“Thirty thousand!” the auctioneer suddenly shouted. “A senior has bid thirty thousand high-grade spiritual stones. Does anyone wish to make a higher offer?”

“Thirty thousand, going twice!”

“Thirty thousand, sold!”

Mo Tianliao watched helplessly and regretfully as the glittering Meteorfall Stone was placed in a dark jade box and removed from the stage. Even in his previous life, a Meteorfall Stone wasn’t something he could just buy whenever he wanted.

“Senior, your item is here,” the attendant outside the door said. Menghu jumped up to open the door.

Stunned, Mo Tianliao turned to look at his master, who was idly tracing the crystal orb with those slender, fair fingers of his, leaving a scratch across the smooth surface from one protruding claw. Menghu grinned as he carried the dark jade box in and held it out to their master.

Without even looking at it, Qingtong tossed over an inventory pouch.

The attendant quickly did a count and broke into a sweat. “Uh, there are only five thousand high-grade spiritual stones here.”

With a slight lift of his fine-boned chin, Qingtong pointed at the still-stunned Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao snapped out of his daze and quickly took out his twenty-five thousand to pay the balance.

Holding the dark jade box with both hands, Mo Tianliao blinked. Slowly, his lips spread into a wide grin. “Sh-Shizun…” He scooted over, only for that jade-like hand to shove his face away.

Mo Tianliao played along and plopped down on the floor, happily examining the Meteorfall Stone in the box. It was even larger than he’d expected; he could make many artifacts with this.

The second-to-last treasure was a superior-grade spiritual artifact. Mo Tianliao and Qingtong weren’t all that interested in it; Menghu seemed keen, but he was unfortunately low on cash, so he turned back into a tiger to warm his master’s feet. Mo Tianliao was planning to leave early when a commotion broke out in the hall.

Iron chains clattered as a beautiful girl was led onto the stage—the final treasure. Her limbs were shackled, and she stumbled unsteadily as if she had been drugged with something to suppress her cultivation.

The foundation establishment cultivators in the hall began buzzing with discussion. Someone indignantly sprang to his feet and shouted, “We’re orthodox cultivators here. How can we trade vessels like unorthodox cultivators do?!”

“Exactly!” The crowd felt a pang of sympathy on seeing the frail girl’s despairing expression.

“Please calm down, ladies and gentlemen. The Six Harmonies Auction House would never sell vessels,” the unfazed auctioneer said. “This girl isn’t meant for dual cultivation practice.”

His words piqued the audience's curiosity, and the shouting dropped to a murmur as the auctioneer took his time taking out an object that looked like an unremarkable ox-horn bugle.

The Spirit-Disciplining Horn! Mo Tianliao's pupils contracted. Before he could react, the auctioneer blew the horn. Rather than a sound, this horn emitted a sort of soul force that could interfere with the divine soul. It had little effect on cultivators with weak divine souls, but it was a different story for spirit beasts whose divine souls were a hundred times more sensitive than humans'. Cultivators usually used it to discipline disobedient soul beasts that had taken on human form.

The girl on the stage screamed and fell to her knees, instantly transforming into a white fox.

The entire hall went wild—this was an evolved spirit beast! A legendary spirit beast that had cultivated into human form by itself!

Too preoccupied to bother with what was happening, Mo Tianliao sprang to the couch and caught a pale-looking Qingtong in his arms. Menghu shifted back to human form and ran over, rubbing his throbbing temples. "Let's get out of here now."

The little fox had probably only evolved recently, so she couldn't withstand the effect of the horn. While Menghu felt uncomfortable, he could still endure it. Qingtong, however, was different.

"Urgh…" Qingtong leaned against Mo Tianliao's chest, his lips pursed into a thin line, his body trembling uncontrollably. The assault to his already damaged divine soul felt exactly like a wound being ripped open. The pain was excruciating. "Quick… Go now… I…can't hold on much… longer…"

Mo Tianliao scooped his master up wordlessly and left the room.

“Leaving already?” The attendant outside the door was surprised. An evolved spirit beast was so incredibly precious and valuable that the auction house had planned to hold off on selling it if they couldn’t receive a satisfactory bid. This sole guest on the fourth floor was the most likely one to be able to afford it. How could they let them leave now?

“You blind fool!” Mo Tianliao hissed, carrying the apparently sleeping man in his arms. “We’re both dead meat if you wake my master up!”

The attendant immediately shut up.

With steady steps, Mo Tianliao walked out of the auction house, summoned his flying sword, and instantly departed.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Does it hurt?

Shizun: Yeah, do you have a way to alleviate it?

Woodworker: Pain, pain, go away~ Come again another day~

Shizun: Scram!

Chapter 38:
Headache

"DID YOU FIND OUT who bought the Meteorfall Stone?" a nascent soul cultivator wearing the Liuyun Sect's wide-sleeved cultivator robe in a room on the third floor asked the person beside him.

"It's a guest from the fourth floor," the person replied with a troubled expression. "Sir, the only ones who can access the fourth floor are great masters at the soul transformation stage. We can't afford to offend them."

The nascent soul cultivator clenched his fists. He'd stumbled upon this auction house by chance today, so he hadn't brought enough spiritual stones with him. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined he would come across a Meteorfall Stone here today. "No. The grand match is just around the corner. I must get my hands on that Meteorfall Stone. Otherwise, that bastard brother of mine will win."

This nascent soul cultivator had the surname Ding. He was the lawful son of an elder from the Liuyun Sect who specialized in artifact forging. He had excellent aptitude, but he'd been overshadowed by a common-born half brother whose gift for artifact forging far surpassed his own. He'd previously schemed to send that bastard to infiltrate the unorthodox path, but by a stroke of luck, the guy had received some pointers from Lord Duantian and returned to be held in esteem by their sect.

"The guest on the fourth floor has left." The Six Harmonies Auction House was jointly managed by the three major sects, so there were people affiliated with each sect inside. The Ding family naturally had their own methods of gathering information if they so wished.

The cultivator stood up. “Please thank the assistant manager for me.”

“You’re welcome. We have you to thank for providing us with the Spirit-Disciplining Horn.” The auction house employee grinned as he glanced at the frenzied bidding on the white fox below.

An ordinary Spirit-Disciplining Horn could only discipline a soul beast who had signed a blood pact with the user. A horn like the one they’d used today, that could tame spirit beasts, was extremely rare, and only a few master artificers could craft such an item.

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“URGH...” Qingtong leaned against Mo Tianliao’s chest. The pain in his head was killing him. He involuntarily gripped the front of Mo Tianliao’s clothes.

Not daring to linger, Mo Tianliao flew as far as he possibly could until they were out of the Spirit-Disciplining Horn’s range. Only then did he slow down.

Menghu caught up in the flying ship. “Come on up.”

Carrying his master, Mo Tianliao jumped onto the flying ship and took over control with one hand, allowing Menghu, who wasn’t feeling great himself, to take a breather. Menghu swallowed a soul-stabilizing pill, then took back control of the ship, indicating to Mo Tianliao that he was fine and he should look after their master instead.

Mo Tianliao didn’t stand on ceremony. He carried Qingtong to the center of the ship and forced a soul-condensing pill through those

bloodstained lips.

“Where are we heading?” Menghu rubbed his temple and glanced at his master, who didn’t look too good. He wondered which unethical old bastard had made that Spirit-Disciplining Horn with such terrifying power.

“Let’s go back to the sect first,” Mo Tianliao told him just as the flying ship braked to a stop, causing them to lurch forward. Reacting quickly, Mo Tianliao grabbed his master in his arms and rolled on the ground to defuse the momentum.

“Who goes there?” Menghu climbed to his feet angrily; someone had forcibly stopped the flying ship with a magical artifact.

The man opposite them froze in shock, clearly not having expected the magical artifact to produce such an effect. “I am Ding Zijin, the son of Elder Ding Hu of Liuyun Sect. I meant no offense to you—oh, it’s Meng-shidi.”

Menghu frowned. The three great sects often interacted with one another, so he recognized this Ding Zijin—not because they had any sort of friendship, but because this person always seemed eager to acquaint himself with the direct line of disciples from the various sects. The man had even given him some small magical artifacts.

The flying ship had a light shield around it, so unless the people riding it stood up, no one outside would be able to see them. Ding Zijin didn’t know who was in the flying ship. But since Menghu was here, the soul transformation cultivator had to be a sanctum-master or a guardian elder from Woyun Sect.

“It’s like this.” Ding Zijin chose his words carefully. “The Liuyun Sect’s grand match is fast approaching, and I need the Meteorfall Stone. I

wonder if…”

Menghu’s face darkened. How did this person know they’d bought a Meteorfall Stone? The Six Harmonies Auction House must have leaked the information. That vile bunch! “You have already broken the Six Harmonies Bazaar’s rules by doing this. I think you should leave now.” His meaning was clear: *The elder on board the ship can’t be bothered with you right now. If you keep pestering him, it’ll only be a matter of time before he puts you in your place!*

“I truly mean no offense. I have with me a superior-grade spiritual artifact and a ten-thousand-year-old spiritual herb to trade for the Meteorfall Stone.” Ding Zijin cast a sidelong glance at the flying ship as he spoke. His father, Ding Hu, was the best artificer among the three great sects. Even the sect leader of Woyun Sect had to show him due respect. He actually didn’t need to obtain the Meteorfall Stone today; all he needed was to see who was in the ship and pay a visit in his father’s name to request an exchange.

Qingtong frowned from where he lay in Mo Tianliao’s arms. This was truly annoying. He started to stand up, intending to teach this presumptuous junior a lesson, but he’d only just sat up when he was assaulted by an intense pain. He involuntarily bit his lower lip. The man outside was a nascent soul cultivator. If he were to find out this soul transformation master was seriously injured, he might just try to snatch it by force.

Mo Tianliao quickly took him back into his arms and gripped Qingtong’s jaw. “Open your mouth.” Round drops of blood seeped from Qingtong’s lower lip, sliding down his fair chin and dripping onto his snow-white robe. Mo Tianliao’s heart ached at the sight. He forcibly pried open the tightly shut lower lip and stifled the escaping groan with his own lips.

Cold eyes widened in shock as Qingtong stared fixedly at the handsome face in front of him. *This insolent disciple! What's he doing?!*

The sensation against Mo Tianliao's cool lips was as soft as glutinous osmanthus cake and tasted incredibly sweet. He briefly lost himself in the intoxicating sensation when it suddenly hit him what he had done on impulse. He'd kissed his master! A chill ran down his spine. He was a goner. His Feline Lordship was sure to claw him to shreds.

The slender fingers resting on Mo Tianliao's back instantly transformed into sharp claws, gleaming coldly in the sunlight. *This damned insolent disciple! Ah…* His raised claws went limp. A warm stream of energy slowly passed between them at the point of contact, smelling faintly of grass and trees, alleviating the intense pain.

The soul-condensing pill could only temporarily stabilize the divine soul, and did nothing to ease his pain, but this stream of energy was like clear spring water irrigating parched earth. Experiencing this comfortable feeling that he hadn't felt in a long time, Qingtong closed his eyes despite himself.

Mo Tianliao now realized he'd done something stupid, but he didn't dare to make any sudden movements for fear of hurting his master. He pulled away gradually and stiffly, prepared for a pummeling. But to his surprise, when he was only a finger's width away, those sweet, thin lips chased after his own and kissed him again.

Dumbstruck, Mo Tianliao stared dazedly at the handsome face so close to his. Those cold eyes were concealed behind lowered eyelids, their long, slender eyelashes fluttering ever so slightly, tickling his face and creating an itch that reached his heart.

Follow your heart, for that is to follow the course of nature and thus the way of the Dao.

As a demonic cultivator, Mo Tianliao would never deny himself what his heart wanted. Since his master didn’t seem to intend to kill him yet—and also because he *wanted* to continue the kiss—he tightened his arms around the beautiful man and deepened the kiss.

Menghu was so annoyed by this Ding guy he wanted to bite him, but there was no movement from the flying ship. Had something happened to his master? The thought made him even more anxious. Just as he was about to check, though, a phantom palm suddenly hurtled toward the still-rambling Ding Zijin.

Startled, Ding Zijin summoned a defensive treasure artifact. When the barrier from the activated treasure was struck by the forceful rush of wind from the palm-strike, the ensuing impact threw him back several feet.

“Shizun.” Menghu looked back to see Qingtong standing with his hands behind his back. He still looked a bit unwell, but his lips were no longer as pale as they had been earlier.

Ding Zijin quickly summoned his flying sword to catch and steady himself. His heart sank when he saw the man in the ship. If he’d encountered the sect leader of Woyun Sect, he’d still have room to maneuver, but it was just his luck to run into the bad-tempered Qingtong-zhenren! “I—*ARGH*—!” He didn’t even manage to get another word out when he was struck by another palm-strike.

“Beat it!” The cold voice, thick with spiritual power, boomed through the clouds.

“I didn’t know it was you. Please forgive me!” Ding Zijin didn’t dare say another word. This man didn’t care about anyone’s sensitivities—he wouldn’t give him the time of day. Displease this fiend, and even if his father were here, he’d beat him up without mercy. Throwing out these words behind him, he fled on his flying sword.

To be fair, when a nascent soul cultivator met a soul transformation cultivator, he could still put up a fight if he was strong enough and had

enough spiritual treasures. But Ding Zijin had only wanted to gather information, not risk his life for it. He was still planning to visit Woyun Sect later to trade for the Meteorfall Stone, so he couldn't risk fighting back and offending Qingtong. But if he didn't fight back, he'd be in for a thrashing. Retreat was the best strategy.

"Shizun, are you all right?" Menghu helped Qingtong back to the chair.

"I'm fine." Qingtong sat down and glanced at Mo Tianliao cowering in the corner.

"Hm? Shidi, what's up with you?" Menghu went over to check on his junior, who was huddling against the stern, holding his head.

"N-nothing…" With his head still lowered, Mo Tianliao shuffled to the helm. "You should take a rest now that Shizun is fine. I'll steer the ship." He commandeered the spot at the steering wheel without any further explanation.

Qingtong snorted and smacked his eldest disciple on the head before he could get any closer.

Menghu scratched his head. Although he was curious, he couldn't defy his master, so he obediently transformed into a tiger and let his master single-handedly carry him to the stern. Well, it was more like he grabbed the tiger by the scruff of his neck, and the tiger compliantly followed. Once there, the tiger plopped down, looking submissive.

Qingtong leaned against the warm tiger and looked at the silent figure at the stern through narrowed eyes. The black outer robe billowed in the wind, revealing the dark-colored inner garment beneath the shredded fabric

of the outer robe. Extending his fingers before him, he looked at them, then at the guy hunched over at the front, feeling the itch in his palm again.

Meanwhile, Mo Tianliao touched the scratches across his face and the bite mark on his chin, not daring to make a sound.

MINI EXTRA

A Fulfilling and Meaningful Day

Little birdie: So, what did everyone gain today?

Six Harmonies Bazaar: Tons of spiritual stones! Ka-ching, kaching!

Ding Zijin: A slap from Qingtong-zhenren! Scared me shitless!

Tiger: A scandalous secret! Shh! (⊙ω⊙)

Woodworker: A faceful of wood shavings… Ehehehe…

Chapter 39:
Information Repository

THE JOURNEY continued in silence.

Mo Tianliao knew he was in the wrong, so he didn't dare to say a word. Qingtong leaned against the tiger and fell asleep. And the tiger, serving as a cushion, had no need to speak.

Nine thousand miles wasn't a distance that could be covered in a single day. The wind was chilly at night, and there were always some evil beings on the prowl when it was dark, making it unsafe to travel. They had to find a cultivators' town or city to take a break—but there were numerous such towns along the way. Mo Tianliao calculated the time and increased the flying ship's speed, hoping to reach Yijin City before sunset.

Cultivators' cities were mostly populated by independent cultivators, but there were also shops established by the various major sects. If Mo Tianliao remembered correctly, this small city, Yijin, had a powerful protective array that prohibited fighting and injuring others within its walls. Any violators would be expelled by the array. It was perfect for an overnight stay, and more importantly, he might find the information he needed there.

The flying ship landed outside the city. Mo Tianliao walked over to pick up the sleeping man, but his outstretched hand paused a short distance away from his master.

His master still hadn't forgiven him for taking liberties with him. If he tried to carry him now, he'd surely get an even more brutal clawing. Mo

Tianliao touched his now-healed face and looked at the peacefully sleeping beauty. His handsome face was half buried in the warm tiger's fur, his cheeks tinted with a slight flush that made Mo Tianliao reluctant to disturb his slumber.

Mo Tianliao gritted his teeth. Oh well, he'd just have to resign himself to getting shredded again. As he wrapped his arms around his master's back, those restful eyes opened slowly and looked quietly at him.

"You're awake…" Mo Tianliao said softly. He didn't have time to withdraw his hands before he got pushed away.

Qingtong stood up and looked around. "Where are we?" The tiger looked up groggily too. Seeing his master awake, he stood up and yawned.

"Yijin." Mo Tianliao put away the flying ship and pointed to the inscriptions at the top of the city wall. "We've been here before. Do you remember?"

Yijin—a haven for respite and guidance—was a melting pot of people from all walks of life. It was also surprisingly safe, making it ideal as an information hub. News on the emergence of secret treasures, the trading of spiritual treasures, sects' secrets, and plenty of other unknown and unheard-of information could be found here.

Qingtong snorted and led the tiger into the city, leaving the question unanswered.

Walking with a spirit beast was a symbol of strength and power. Passersby they came across cast envious glances at the strong, well-fed tiger that followed behind this stunningly attractive man. Looking at a spirit beast this ferocious, no one would suspect it hadn't signed a blood pact,

especially with the way the tiger constantly rubbed against its master's leg like a tame cat.

Mo Tianliao stayed silent as he followed behind them and looked around. There were many stalls by the street. One stall had a taiji diagram with a banner that said *Fortune-Telling*. A foundation establishment cultivator sitting behind it started hollering his sales pitch the moment he met Mo Tianliao's eyes. "Sir, come and have your fortune told! Find out when you can ascend to immortality."

"How many spiritual stones for a reading?" Mo Tianliao stopped in front of the stall.

"That depends. The price varies on what you want to know," the cultivator replied casually.

Mo Tianliao narrowed his eyes and turned to leave. These so-called "fortune-telling" stalls were actually information sellers. As long as you paid enough spiritual stones, you could find out practically anything you wanted. He looked up to see his master watching him from a distance, so he hurried over to catch up. But as soon as he drew closer, his master walked away again.

Rubbing his nose, Mo Tianliao quickened his pace and jumped in front of his master. "Shizun…"

Qingtong looked at him coldly.

"Shizun, you've walked past it." Mo Tianliao pointed to the inn in the opposite direction. At the rate his master was going, they would soon be back outside the city.

"Hmph. Of course I knew that." Qingtong huffed and walked back to the inn.

This was the largest inn in Yijin City, and prices were high. Qingtong asked for a deluxe room and an economy room and tossed the door token for the economy room to Mo Tianliao before heading up the stairs. The tiger followed after him, but Qingtong kicked him back down.

The two fellow disciples looked at each other and dejectedly made their way to the economy room.

The economy room was rather simple and basic, with a wooden bed and a table, but cultivators weren't particular about this kind of thing as long as they had a place to meditate for a night. After settling the tiger in, Mo Tianliao went to leave again.

"Shidi, where are you going?" The tiger jumped off the bed and transformed into Menghu.

"I'm going to buy fried fish for Shizun," Mo Tianliao answered smoothly, without batting an eyelid. "Is there something you want to eat?"

Menghu's eyes lit up at the mention of food. "You decide, as long as there's tasty meat."

Mo Tianliao's lips curved into a smile. He patted his senior on the head and walked out of the inn.

Menghu turned back into a tiger and sprang onto the bed, kneading it, his striped tail swishing back and forth—but suddenly he froze. His junior had patted him on the head again! Who exactly was the senior here?! *No! I'll need to teach him a lesson about respecting his elders!*

Leaving the inn, Mo Tianliao took his time checking out several fortune-telling stalls, eventually stopping in front of a foundation establishment cultivator with a long beard. He put a medium-grade spiritual

stone on the table. “I heard there’s an Information Repository in the city. Does it still exist?”

The cultivator kept the spiritual stone in his sleeve and stroked his beard. “Of course it does, but their prices are nothing like my humble stall’s.”

Some information couldn’t be obtained from these small stalls. The cultivator led Mo Tianliao to the alley behind and entered an unmarked shop. Mo Tianliao put on a black cloak and covered his face before stepping in.

“This way, sir.” The receptionist exchanged nods with the long-bearded cultivator and led Mo Tianliao into an inner room. A core formation cultivator with white hair and beard sat in the room with a tray neatly arranged with jade slips in front of him.

Mo Tianliao sat down across the table from the cultivator and glanced at the patterns on the jade slips. The original flame insignia had been erased and replaced with an odd eagle head. His eyes darkened. This Information Repository had once been his business, with branches in the cultivators’ cities of both orthodox and unorthodox paths, trading information between the two powers. Things seemed to have changed in his absence.

“I’d like to know the whereabouts of Lord Duantian’s divine artifact,” Mo Tianliao said in a hushed tone.

The core formation cultivator nudged the empty tray toward Mo Tianliao. “One hundred medium-grade spiritual stones for a direction, three hundred medium-grade spiritual stones for a location, and five hundred medium-grade spiritual stones for the full story.”

Surprisingly enough, there had been no change in rules or prices. Mo Tianliao took out fifty high-grade spiritual stones and placed them in the tray. Luckily for him, his cat didn't like counting, and the bag of spiritual stones he'd thrown him had extra. Otherwise he wouldn't have had enough money to seek information.

"Three hundred years ago, the divine artifact made its appearance in the world. All this time, it has been with Elder Ding of Liuyun Sect, but…"

Elder Ding was Ding Hu, a master artificer and the father of Ding Zijin, whom they had met on the way. Everyone knew the divine artifact wasn't finished, and they'd hoped Master Ding could complete it, but even after a century of research, Ding Hu still hadn't made any headway with it. Eventually, it had been stolen by the number one thief in Taixuan.

After that, the divine artifact had circulated among the various markets. One major sect had bought it, but without a suitable artificer, it had ended up being resold. The divine artifact was useless if it wasn't finished, and sales stagnated among the orthodox markets, so it fell into the unorthodox markets.

"Seven days from now, it will be auctioned at Bahuang City of the demonic path. If you're interested, you can check it out."

Bahuang City… Mo Tianliao frowned. He was surprised to learn the market for Taishi had plateaued.

When he left the Information Repository, the moon was already high up in the sky. With nowhere to buy fried fish or roast lamb leg, Mo Tianliao returned to the inn. The tiger was sound asleep in the economy room, and he was snoring so loudly you could hear him from outside. Mo Tianliao

looked up at the room upstairs. Still unable to set his mind at ease, he went up for a look.

With the city's protective array in place, these rooms didn't set up any other barriers or wards. Mo Tianliao quietly climbed through the window and stood by the bed, looking at the man who lay on it. His slender fingers, which could have been carved out of jade, glowed white under the moonlight. Mo Tianliao couldn't help himself—he tucked that slightly cool arm back under the covers. Five sharp claws suddenly sprang out of those round fingertips, scaring Mo Tianliao so badly his hair stood on end.

"Insolent disciple, what are you doing?"

MINI EXTRA

Shizun: What are you doing in my room in the middle of the night?

Woodworker: The night is long, and I can't sleep.

Shizun: Then let's do something interesting!

Woodworker: (≧◡≦) Sure!

Shizun: (*scratching sounds*) Hm… The back doesn't scratch as well as the face.

Woodworker: QAQ

Chapter 40:
Appeasing the Cat

MO TIANLIAO stiffened and gulped, then nonchalantly grasped that clawed hand. “It’s cold at night. You should cover yourself up well, especially when you are furless.”

“Speak for yourself!” Qingtong glared at him with his night-vision eyes.

“You’re right, I don’t have any fur at all.” Mo Tianliao laughed despite himself. He brazenly sat on the bed and tucked the slightly chilly hand in. “But I have leaves.” He extended a hand to his master. The hand slowly transformed into green-veined wood. After a while, a tiny leaf sprouted from his fingertip, attached to a tiny stem for support.

Qingtong was about to kick the intruder off his bed, but his attention was drawn to the quivering leaf. Retracting his claws, he gingerly touched that tiny leaf. A small stream of regenerative life force spread along his fingertip, bringing a touch of refreshing coolness with it. He tapped it once, then tapped it again. The young, tender leaf nodded its head in tandem with the rise and fall of his finger. And then—*snap*—it broke off and fluttered down onto the blanket.

Mo Tianliao was a little speechless. He’d put an entire day’s worth of accumulated spiritual energy into sprouting that tiny leaf, and now it was gone, just like that.

Qingtong pulled his hand back under the covers and glanced at this silly disciple showing off his leaf. “Childish.”

As if you weren't the one playing with it just now. Mo Tianliao snorted with an exasperated smile and shook his head. There was just no reasoning with His Feline Lordship. He changed his hand back to normal and tucked the blanket around his master; as he did, his fingers brushed against that delicate chin, and his heart fluttered.

"About today… I…" Mo Tianliao withdrew the hand that always couldn't resist touching his master and folded both hands properly on his lap.

Qingtong glared at him, waiting to hear what excuse this insolent disciple could have for taking liberties with his master.

"I had no intention of taking advantage of you. I saw your lips bleeding, and I…" "Couldn't help myself"? No, no. He couldn't say that. "Wasn't thinking clearly"? He'd be clawed to shreds!

"How dare you still make excuses after taking advantage of your shizun!" Qingtong sat up.

"Not like it's a one-way street. You did the same to me later," Mo Tianliao muttered in a small voice. His heart had ached when he saw His Feline Lordship's bleeding lips, and in his panic, he'd held him and tried to stop the bleeding with his lips. When he realized just how inappropriate it was, he'd quickly let go, but his master himself had chased after him. How could he resist such a temptation?

Naturally, those sensitive cat ears had caught his grumblings. "Get out of here!" Qingtong raged, and kicked that insolent disciple off the bed. If it hadn't been for that warm, enticing regenerative life force, he would have never done such a thing! He had been in so much pain he'd nearly passed out. The comfortable feeling that came out of the blue was like

having someone scratch the intolerable itch on his chin, so of course he'd hold out his chin for this cat slave to keep scratching!

Mo Tianliao stumbled, his anger rising too. "You're my cat to begin with. What's wrong with a kiss?!" They'd often kissed when he was younger too, hadn't they? While it was true that His Feline Lordship sometimes bit him, most of the time, the little fuzzball would let him smooch his face.

Qingtong froze for a moment, then slowly lowered his gaze and said nothing further. He lay back down with his back to Mo Tianliao.

Silence hung in the air. Mo Tianliao realized he might have gone too far. He sat on the bed with a sheepish expression. "Shizun, I…"

"You should go." The cold voice sounded tired.

"I'm going over to unorthodox territory tomorrow, so I won't be able to accompany you back to the sect." Mo Tianliao grasped the shoulder of the man on the bed. "When you get back, have the sect leader check if your divine soul was injured. I'll try to make a magical artifact that can isolate the soul force of the Spirit-Disciplining Horn when I get back."

"Just go." The hands concealed under the covers slowly clenched into fists. Qingtong shrugged his shoulder, shaking off his licentious disciple's hand.

"Nope. I'm sleeping here." Mo Tianliao removed his shoes and socks, climbed into the bed, and snuggled up to his master.

"You…" Qingtong turned to glare at him, just in time to meet the face snuggling up to him. Their noses touched. Their eyes locked.

"Pawpaw." Mo Tianliao grinned as he poked his master with his nose. "Don't be angry. I was the one at fault today. I was horny and I

couldn’t hold back. If you’re still upset, you can—ouch! Ow, ow, ow!”

Poking a cat’s snout with your nose was a dangerous thing to do. A moment of inattention, and you might get bitten—hard. It was the same even if His Feline Lordship had turned into a cold, gorgeous shizun.

And so, Mo Tianliao, who had failed to appease his cat, covered his bitten nose and slunk downstairs to share a room with his senior.

The bed in the economy room was neither spacious nor soft, and it was mostly occupied by the tiger sprawled out in the center. Just his thick tail took up a good portion of the space. Even when he sensed someone approaching, he didn’t open his eyes but merely probed with his divine sense. Sensing it was his junior, he relaxed and went right back to snoring.

Mo Tianliao sighed. A core formation cultivator who still slept? Shouldn’t he be seizing the opportunity to mediate and cultivate, letting his weak shidi sleep in the bed instead?

He shoved the tiger toward the inner side of the bed, climbed up, and leaned against him. The soft, warm, furry belly was very comfortable. No wonder his master was so fond of leaning against this spot. The tiger, probably too accustomed to being bullied by his master, didn’t wake up even when someone lay on his stomach.

Mo Tianliao nuzzled against the thick fur. Tiger fur was coarse, not as soft as a cat’s fur. He pillowed his head on a hand and gazed quietly at the sliver of moonlight that filtered through the window gap. Slowly, he touched his lips, remembering the soft and sweet contact earlier. His heart inexplicably raced.

Think no evil! That was his own dear shizun! His very own cat! After silently telling himself this ten times and reciting the Heart-Purifying Inner

Demon-Exorcising Mantra to himself, Mo Tianliao closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The next day, Mo Tianliao handed the flying ship over to his senior. Glancing at the still-closed door upstairs, Mo Tianliao instructed his senior to take good care of their shizun and left.

A divine artifact was so expensive that even auction houses only ever sold them at grand auctions held every few years. If someone else ended up buying Taishi, it'd be even more challenging for Mo Tianliao to get his hands on it. Time was of the essence. He had to hurry.

He had barely traveled three miles on his flying sword when he encountered a man standing in midair, his long, snow-white robe billowing in the wind. For a fleeting moment, he thought he'd chanced across an immortal who had descended and accidentally lost his way.

"Shizun!" Mo Tianliao hurried over. "Why didn't you go back?"

"What were you thinking going to unorthodox territory with your cultivation at the foundation establishment stage?" Qingtong glanced at him. Mo Tianliao wanted that divine artifact, but he didn't want to spend money—Qingtong could already guess what he was planning to do. If he went alone into the demon lair, all it would take was a single mistake and he would be blasted into smithereens. And he still had the nerve to leave his master behind and go alone?

"I'm not going to fight anyone." Mo Tianliao's lips spread into a wide grin. His Feline Lordship was worried about him, wasn't he? He carefully inched closer and pulled on his master's sleeve.

Qingtong huffed in response, but didn't shake his hand off.

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Two days later, in the unorthodox sect territory, a guard hurried into Demon Lord Shidi's demon palace and kneeled to report. "My lord, a foundation establishment artificer wishes to seek an audience with you."

The demon lord narrowed his eyes as the beautiful women around him served him spiritual wine. Hearing this news, he frowned. "A mere cultivator at the foundation establishment stage?" he bellowed. "Who is he to seek an audience with me?" This was truly unusual. He was notorious in the demon realm for his brutality, but here this small fry was, asking to meet him. The sheer audacity!

The guard trembled. "He also asked me to pass along a message."

"What message?" Lord Shidi sat up and scoffed. How dare a mere cultivator have someone pass him a message? If the message was pointless, he'd have his men tear him apart.

"He said, '*I'm an old acquaintance, and I hope Hammer can spare me a moment to chat*.'" The guard mopped at his brow. He didn't know what the message meant, but the cultivator had a calm demeanor and showed no fear of the demonic cultivators guarding the doors, so the guard had ended up somewhat convinced by him.

Shidi's eyes widened. Who was this person? His original name contained the word "chui," which meant hammer. He'd lived for over a thousand years, and his family was long gone. The only one left who knew his real name was Duantian. But that dude had been dead for centuries…

"Bring him in!"

Mo Tianliao patted the cat hiding under his collar and followed the guard into the palace.

Shidi's demon palace was built on a rocky mountain. It looked sinister and terrifying from the outside, but inside, it was grand and opulent. If someone wanted to build their palace in a treacherous location for the intimidation factor, though, they had to consider whether the location had abundant spiritual energy; after all, spiritual herbs and trees were an indispensable part of cultivation. It would be a mistake to assume that the rugged mountain outside was purely for intimidation—these were actually spiritual ore mountains of varying sizes, with a countless supply of spiritual stones contained within.

As for Shidi, an old, repeated customer of his, Mo Tianliao's assessment was: foolish *and* rich.

MINI EXTRA

A Demon Lord Must Have an Imposing Name

Demonic Cultivator A: I heard Lord Shidi is descended from the Yellow Emperor.

Demonic Cultivator B: I heard he came from a family of scholars.

Demonic Cultivator C: I heard… I can't think of anything to make up!

Woodworker: Big Hammer! Come get your new weapon!

Chapter 41:
Con Job

MO TIANLIAO STEPPED INTO the palace, and the over-the-top opulence immediately punched him in the face. The high dome above was carved with intricate and resplendent patterns, while dragons sculpted from expensive sunstones coiled around the black-and-gold pillars. The floor was covered in a thick rug made from the wool of highland goats and dyed a dark red. Countless maidservants thronged the hall, carrying wine, serving tea, or dancing, each of them strikingly beautiful.

A jet-black lion lay on the floor. This was Lord Shidi's soul beast, the Black Nightmare Lion. The lion was about ten feet long, and he had strong, powerful limbs and a ferocious expression. Beside him stood an ornate throne.

Tall and burly, Lord Shidi was wearing a dark-colored, formfitting outfit, uniquely designed with several large openings connected by gold-and-silver armor. With one muscular arm that had been left bare, he accepted a cup of wine from his maidservant and downed it in one gulp.

As he sized up Mo Tianliao, Mo Tianliao scrutinized him back from under the hood of cloak. It had been three hundred years, but the guy hadn't changed a bit—still a pretentious culture snob who loved putting on airs. He clearly preferred drinking out of large bowls, but he insisted on using exquisite jade cups—and then, finding it unsatisfactory to drink from tiny cups, he went and had those jade cups made into extra-large bowls.

"You're the one looking for me?" Lord Shidi held the cup out for the maidservant to refill as he glanced nonchalantly at the cultivator below.

“Greetings, Lord Shidi.” Mo Tianliao raised his hands in a perfunctory greeting.

The fact that this junior didn’t kneel on seeing him displeased Lord Shidi. Sensing his master’s mood, the lion raised his head and bared his fangs at Mo Tianliao.

“I’ve come to see you uninvited as I was left with no choice, for you are the only one who can fulfill my late father’s wish,” Mo Tianliao said in a young and clear voice.

“And who the hell is your father?” Shidi grew impatient. He’d seen too many people like this, offering him treasures per their deceased ancestors’ wishes, throwing in their lot with him because it was their mother’s last wish, or pledging servitude for their family honor, and so on. Who the heck did these people think they were?

Mo Tianliao’s lips curved into a smile as he threw his hood back, revealing an impeccably handsome face with chiseled features, sharp brows, and bright eyes.

CRASH! The bowl-sized jade cup fell to the ground, splashing spiritual wine all over the lion’s head and soaking his majestic mane. The lion leaped up and bared his fangs at his master.

“Duantian!” Shidi sprang to his feet. The intimidating spiritual power in his voice sent the maidservants to their knees.

Mo Tianliao, having already erected a defensive shield around himself, steadily blocked out Shidi’s shouting. “May I talk to you in private?”

It finally hit Lord Shidi that this junior had claimed to be here on his deceased father’s wishes. Duantian had already been dead for three hundred

years. Even if he'd come back to life through possession, his cultivation level shouldn't have been at the foundation establishment stage. So this person wasn't Duantian, but with that face of his, he was definitely connected to him. Lord Shidi waved his hands at the others. "Go, go. Everyone, out!"

The maidservants filed out, leaving only two men and two beasts behind in the hall.

Nightmare went down and circled Mo Tianliao. Baring his fangs at him, he leaned in to sniff his scent. A furry white head popped out of Mo Tianliao's collar and opened his little pink mouth in a yawn.

At the little kitten's appearance, the lion's mane stood on end. Whining, the lion flattened his ears and lowered his body, looking frightened.

Dumb lion. The cat glanced at the huge beast. It had been three centuries since they last met, and the lion was still as stupid as ever.

The lion took several steps back, then several more, then turned tail and ran to hide behind Shidi. Alas, it was impossible for an animal his size to be fully concealed behind a human man, so he simply hid his head behind his master's rear end in a stubborn but pitiful attempt at self-deception.

"This cat…" Shidi's eyes widened. All of the demon lords had soul beasts, and each one was more ferocious than the last. Duantian, with that precious baby kitten he was always carrying around, was the sole outlier. But even though the other demon lords were constantly poking fun at him, Duantian carried on doing whatever he wanted—he even refused to form a blood pact with that kitten.

“It’s my father’s cat. Before he passed on, he instructed me to take good care of him.” Mo Tianliao looked down tenderly at the cat in his arms and patted him on the head.

Now Shidi felt certain that this man wasn’t Duantian—because whenever Duantian showed affection to his cat, he would always make an embarrassing spectacle of pressing his face against the cat and smooching it from head to paws, and he’d always come away with scratches.

“I’ve never heard anything about Duantian having a son.” Calming down a bit, Shidi looked at the young man, who appeared to be no more than twenty. Duantian had been dead for three hundred years. If he’d been reborn through possession, it would have happened at the time of death, so any sons he’d had would have to have been born three hundred years ago. There had never been any shortage of people who wanted to climb into Duantian’s bed, but that unappreciative guy had only ever used his beauties as furnace tenders. It was hard to imagine who might have borne him a son. And besides, how could a three-hundred-year-old son still be at the foundation establishment stage?

“Would you like to hear a story, my lord?” Mo Tianliao smiled. Without waiting for Shidi’s nod, he sat on the rug, took a deep breath, and began narrating.

In the past, Lord Duantian had sensed he was about to undergo a heavenly tribulation and ascend to immortality, but he couldn’t find a worthy successor among those who sought to be his disciples. Instead he’d used his own blood essence, along with materials from several types of divine trees, to create a one-of-a-kind puppet.

This puppet-human far surpassed the ordinary puppets that only followed commands. The divine trees fused together with Duantian's blood essence, along with several unmentionable special materials. The puppet-human became a celestial artifact—one with his own thoughts, who was no different from a common man. This celestial artifact bore the same looks as Duantian, and Duantian called him his son.

Shidi's jaw nearly dropped. Divine tree? Blood essence? A puppet son? This was insane—and, indeed, something that only that madman Duantian would do.

"However, a puppet is still a puppet. I couldn't possess a real flesh-and-blood body, nor would I be able to cultivate normally…" As Mo Tianliao spoke, he rolled up his sleeves and held out his hand. The entire limb slowly transformed into wood, its veins now visibly green. "So my father crafted a divine artifact for my sake."

Legend had it that when a divine artifact was complete, it would bring the surrounding inanimate objects to life. By that logic, it could also enlighten a divine artifact puppet, turning it into a real cultivator.

"As you can see, it's been three hundred years, but I'm still at the foundation establishment stage. It's because I still lack enlightenment from the divine artifact," Mo Tianliao said with a bitter smile.

Shidi crouched before Mo Tianliao in disbelief and touched the wooden arm, marveling just how exquisite this puppet was. If he'd known about this back then, he would have had Duantian make one for him, no matter how much it cost him. He retracted his hand and lowered his eyes, thinking quickly.

This puppet son claimed that only the enlightenment sparked by the completion of a divine artifact could give him a real body, the one he needed to continue his cultivation. His purpose in coming here, then, was clear—he wanted Shidi's help obtaining the divine artifact.

Shidi stood up, dusting off his robe, and smiled. "Duantian is dead. Even if you get your hands on the divine artifact, no one can help you with the enlightenment."

"My father crafted me with his blood essence, so I inherited his legacy. As long as I have sufficient spiritual power, I can finish refining the divine artifact." Mo Tianliao stood up too, his eyes brimming with the confidence and dauntless attitude of the young. "You just need to bring the divine artifact back and let me complete it. The divine artifact is all yours once I'm enlightened. I hope you won't find it beneath you."

Shidi's eyes lit up. Beneath him? Not at all! This was a divine artifact they were talking about! Duantian had been hunted down by both the orthodox and unorthodox sects because of that divine artifact's immense power, and with Mo Tianliao's mercurial temperament, he could have killed anyone he pleased. If he, Shidi, were to possess such a weapon, he would be fearless no matter who he faced—be it those demon lords on his level or the number one venerable lord of the unorthodox sects. It would only be a matter of time before he dominated the lands of Taixuan!

He wiped his hand across his face to catch the drool nearly spilling out of his mouth and scoffed with feigned reservation. "Ignorant youth, do you expect me to believe you based on words alone?"

Mo Tianliao smiled. "The spiritual treasure bound to you is the Skycleaver Axe, and its ultimate move can only be used once per fight. To

use it again after that, you need to wait for a month."

Demon Lord Shidi's gaze suddenly sharpened. He had two spiritual treasures bound to him for life. His Skycleaver Axe had immense power, but it would crack after one use and needed to be restored in his energy core for a month before it could be used again. He had always kept this as his trump card. He and Duantian were the only people who had ever known its weakness.

Legend had it that the Skycleaver Axe could kill anyone standing in its way, gods and Buddhas alike. However, it was rarely seen in action. Everyone assumed that Demon Lord Shidi found it beneath someone of his status to use his ultimate move on the average person. No one but him knew the bitter truth.

Who wouldn't want to unleash their ultimate move whenever they dealt a blow?! But this move could only be used once. What was he going to do if his opponent had a counter up their sleeve?

"Actually, the axe only cracks because it gets too hot." Mo Tianliao idly played with the cat's paw. "Just spit some spiritual wine on it, and you'll be able to use it two more times."

"What?!" Shidi sprang to his feet. Why had Duantian never told him, if it was that easy?!

Mo Tianliao flashed him an innocent smile. "My father thought that spraying wine on one's blade was the kind of thing an executioner would do. He felt it would be unseemly for you to do something like that, so he couldn't bring himself to tell you."

Fuming, Shidi paced in circles three times and cursed Duantian a hundred times. He was now convinced this puppet son had inherited Mo

Tianliao's legacy. He waved his hand. "Since you're the son of an old friend, you're like my own son. Don't worry. This uncle of yours will get that divine artifact back for you!"

This uncle of his?! Mo Tianliao inwardly cursed Shidi, although he still cupped his hands and said his thanks.

Demon Lord Shidi immediately sent his men to find the divine artifact's whereabouts, then had the maidservants take Mo Tianliao to a room to rest. As Mo Tianliao stepped out of the hall, Shidi suddenly said, "My dear nephew, you still haven't told me your name."

Mo Tianliao quirked a smile. "Mo Yunqi," he replied without looking back. Lord Shidi picked up his wine cup again, the last of his doubt now dispelled. He was the only one who knew Lord Duantian's surname was Mo —everyone else who knew of this was dead.

Seeing the cat being carried away, the lion sauntered out of hiding and put on a show of shaking his mane and letting loose a majestic roar, as if this wasn't the same lion who'd been cowering behind his master with flattened ears just moments ago.

MINI EXTRA

Ending Theme: What You Don't Know

Lion: You don't know why he didn't tell you~ Rawr~

Pawpaw: I said we can't just let you huff air on your axe~ Mreow~

Woodworker: There is just~ so much~ you don't know~

Shidi: QAQ Blast you to hell and back, Duantian! I’m not done with you!

Chapter 42:
Harem

THE ENTIRE DEMON PALACE was lavishly decorated, even the guest rooms.

The maidservant led Mo Tianliao to a guest room near Shidi's rear palace. A walkway with upturned eaves stretched across the front of the room, offering him a panoramic view of the courtyard garden.

"Please rest well. If you need anything, just call for the maidservants outside your door." The maidservant showed Mo Tianliao in and left.

Mo Tianliao surveyed the room's furnishings. A dark red carpet covered the entire floor. Positioned by the window was a low and wide canopy-less bed with thick bedding and comfortable cushions—the kind of bed Shidi liked. The burly man disliked sheer curtains because he felt they were bothersome and effeminate. Every bedroom in the palace had this kind of low bed, where you could simply lie down and sleep.

Seeing the large, soft bed, the little fluffball sprang onto it and looked around for any strange smells or hidden weapons. Once satisfied, he lay down in the middle of the bed. As a precaution, Qingtong didn't intend to change into human form, even if it was just the two of them here.

Mo Tianliao inspected the entire room but found no other arrays except for the defensive one at the entrance. He placed a few small magical artifacts in the corners of the room and erected an additional protective barrier at the doors and windows. Then, at last, he sprang onto the bed and buried his face in that snow-white fur.

With deadly accuracy, the white cat bit down on Mo Tianliao's eyelid without even looking.

"Yeowch!" Rubbing his bitten eyelid, Mo Tianliao moved his face away pitifully and nuzzled up to the cat. "Pawpaw…"

The cat swatted him. *Insolent disciple, what are you calling me?*

"Shizun," Mo Tianliao corrected himself, accurately reading the cat's mood. "There's only one bed tonight, so you'll just have to put up with me."

The cat flicked his tail and slept on, paying him no heed.

Is that an agreement? Mo Tianliao wondered with a grin as he moved onto the bed and gathered the cat into his arms. The little furball immediately sprang out of his arms and settled down again with his butt facing him.

"Still angry?" The thick-skinned Mo Tianliao snuggled up to him and poked the cat's back with his nose. "We always kissed when you were little, and you didn't ignore me then."

Insolent disciple! How dare you bring that up! The cat glared at him. *You took advantage of my young age to take liberties with me. Now that I'm no longer the naive youngster, I cannot allow you to—mmm…*

His light eyes widened as Mo Tianliao gave his tiny, furry mouth a light peck.

"I didn't mean to take liberties with you. I just like you too much."

The cat had been about to bite him again, but now he looked up at him slowly, taken aback. Those deep, dark eyes, with a snow-white cat reflected in them, looked back at him with tenderness.

…Damn it, I’m not your pet!

And so, Mo Tianliao’s face was clawed to shreds again.

Mo Tianliao had learned his lesson. He kept his hands to himself and lay down obediently while His Feline Lordship climbed onto him and used him as a cushion.

A spirit beast could soothe an agitated or restless divine soul and suppress a cultivator’s inner demons, and the effect was far more potent if an evolved spirit beast was used as a vessel. Most spirit beasts were attractive in their human forms, besides. Some unorthodox cultivators were known to dual-cultivate with their soul beasts. These unorthodox cultivators followed their hearts, with some even openly embracing their proclivities in public without holding back. The hypocrites of the orthodox path, however, looked all prim and proper on the outside, treating the soul beasts they had signed blood pacts with as servants or attendants, but who could say whether they could resist the allure of the evolved spirit beasts in private? What really happened behind closed doors was another matter entirely.

Mo Tianliao gazed at the soundly sleeping cat on his chest with a conflicted expression. He’d claimed he’d only acted out of anxiety on the flying ship, but did he really have no ulterior motive? Those light, cool, thin lips… Just thinking about it made the sweet taste return with a vengeance. His heart fluttered.

He stroked the little cat on his chest, then smacked himself on the head. What was he thinking? Time to sleep!

Danger lurked everywhere in the demon palace, so Mo Tianliao couldn’t really fall into a deep sleep. Instead, he closed his eyes, regulated his breathing, and unleashed his divine sense to monitor movements within

a third of a mile radius. The divine sense of a cultivator at the soul transformation stage could easily monitor the entire palace, but he couldn't extend it too far, or he'd risk being discovered by Shidi. After all, he was just a foundation establishment cultivator who wouldn't survive a punch from Shidi.

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THERE WERE NO UPDATES for a couple of days after Shidi left Mo Tianliao in the guest room, but Mo Tianliao wasn't worried. Information he could buy with spiritual stones wouldn't be hard for Lord Shidi to uncover. His fish had taken the bait, and there was no escape.

Mo Tianliao brewed a pot of tea and settled down at a stone table in the garden to watch his cat frolic.

Shidi was a boorish man with a taste for things he saw as refined and cultured. This garden was exquisitely designed, featuring stone tables and stools sculpted from fine white jade. The garden was filled with exotic flowers and plants, interspersed with century-old medicinal herbs. The small paths among the flowers were inlaid with round, shiny stones that, upon closer inspection, turned out to be spiritual stones.

It was like those wealthy landowners in the mortal world who built an exquisite garden of the sort you found in the households of the literati, only to completely defeat the purpose by paving the floors with copper coins for decoration.

The cat climbed to the top of a laurel tree and looked around, noticing a black figure slowly approaching from a short distance away.

Shidi was busy handling affairs, and Nightmare, feeling bored, had come over to look for the cat. It had been three centuries since they'd last met, and for all these years, he'd been the only lion in the palace. Occasionally there were other spirit beasts that Shidi gave to his subordinates as rewards, but they were all silly animals who were no fun to hang out with. Seeing the tiny ball of white on the branch, the lion promptly crouched low and hid among the dense flowerbeds. He inched forward slowly, closing the distance.

Mo Tianliao sat drinking his tea, although his divine sense wasn't idle—he'd detected the lion long ago, but he wasn't worried, considering his cat's cultivation level. Feigning ignorance, he continued to sip his tea and gaze at the flowers.

"Mreoooow—" The cat, standing atop the tree, threw his head back and let loose a long yowl. Startled, the lion stumbled. With a shake of his fur, he sprang to the foot of the tree. The cat looked down at the lion from above and flicked his tail. The lion cocked his head and slowly extended his two paws forward before setting his head on his paws in a show of submission.

Mo Tianliao watched with curiosity. He knew Pawpaw wasn't afraid of the demon lords' soul beasts. He'd always thought that soul beasts with blood pacts simply didn't harm others and had good tempers; he'd never known this was how they interacted with one another. A ten-foot-long lion lowering his head with paws outstretched to a palm-sized cat was an amusing sight no matter how you looked at it.

The cat leaped from the tree, landing precisely on the lion's thick mane, and climbed up atop the lion's head. Nightmare stood up and shook his body.

"Meow!" Pawpaw cried out—he was probably saying "giddy-up" or something, because the lion bounded out of the flowerbeds and trotted on with measured steps, ferrying the cat around.

The sight left Mo Tianliao dumbstruck.

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THE PLACE WHERE MO TIANLIAO was drinking tea was the front garden, which was usually frequented by Shidi's guests and subordinates. There was another rear garden where Shidi's concubines lived.

Weirdos like Lord Duantian, who had his beauties tending fire or forging iron, were in the minority. Shidi, who was more normal relatively speaking, naturally took the beauties he was gifted as his concubines and threw them in the rear palace. It was a matter of male pride; whether he actually used them or not was irrelevant.

In the rear garden, a group of brightly dressed women were chatting. Each had their own distinctive charm, ranging from ravishing beauties to delicate flowers and the fragile sort that resembled willow branches in the wind.

"Greetings, sisters." A woman in a light yellow dress came over and curtsied to them. She had just been sent here yesterday.

“Oh look, a new arrival.” A woman in red, munching on a seed, glanced at her. The others looked over too.

The women exchanged greetings. A particularly sociable one pulled along the new woman and introduced her to the others. Just as their conversation grew animated, they saw someone sneaking along the corridor.

“Who’s that?” The new woman pointed.

Mo Tianliao was worried about his cat. He’d been following him in secret when a bunch of fancy women intercepted him.

“Who are you? Are you the lord’s new male lover?”

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. He looked up at the women—and they were all stunned at the sight of his face. What a handsome man! On the demonic path, the strong reigned supreme; female cultivators naturally favored men with immense power, even more so if they were handsome as well as powerful. The same thing had happened to Duantian in his previous life, where all those female cultivators willingly threw themselves at him like moths to a flame, even if they just ended up doing menial tasks.

The man before them walked with measured steps and wore a cold and detached expression. He looked every bit a cultivator who had been powerful for many years—but on closer inspection, they found that he was only at the foundation establishment stage. It looked like this really was the lord’s new lover. After all, a man who appeared strong but was actually weak was the most exciting target for another man’s desire to conquer and dominate.

The mouth of the woman in red, who had been here the longest, fell open. “Y-you…” This man’s resemblance to Lord Duantian was uncanny!

She felt like she must have uncovered an extraordinary secret.

The women whispered among themselves, and one by one, their jaws dropped too.

“Don’t be rude,” a deep voice said behind them. They looked back to see a tall, handsome man in black walking over. Unlike Mo Tianliao’s black robe with faint silver patterns, this man’s robe was completely black, with no decoration whatsoever, cutting a stark contrast with the white cat perched on his shoulder.

The women fell silent at the sight of Nightmare’s human form; no one dared to offend him.

Rescued by this timely intervention, Mo Tianliao took the cat and left. Nightmare pursed his lips. *This guy didn’t even say thank you.…* Just as this thought crossed his mind, though, he saw the cat on Mo Tianliao’s shoulder gazing at him with those light-colored glass orbs. He shrank back and didn’t say anything else.

“Who is that?” The newcomer pointed at the arrogant man in black.

“He’s the lord’s demon pet.” The woman in red jealously clenched her fist. “The lord spends nine out of ten days sleeping with him.”

Nightmare stumbled. Spirit beasts had keen senses, so even after he had walked a third of a mile away, he could still hear their conversation. Him? Having an affair with his master? At the thought of his master’s hulking physique…the lion felt psychologically traumatized.

MINI EXTRA

Demonic Path Entertainment Weekly

Breaking News: Demon Lord Shidi’s New Lover Bears a Striking Resemblance to Duantian.

Special Feature: The Love-Hate Relationship Between Shidi and Duantian All These Years.

Paparazzi Shot: Nightmare Grieves Alone After Falling Out of Favor.

Nightmare’s mental damage after reading the magazine: +10000.

Lion: Protest against the psychological abuse of endangered animals! Rawr!

Chapter 43:
Brothel

SPIRIT BEASTS that had signed a blood pact—in other words, soul beasts—were known as soul companions by the orthodox sects and demonic companions by those from the unorthodox sects. Unlike with spiritual artifacts, of which they could possess several, a cultivator could only form a blood pact with a spirit beast once in their lifetime. As the saying went, rarity bred value. As the demonic companion of a demon lord, the lion held a prestigious position in the demon palace.

Emotionally hurt, the lion retreated to the foot of a tree to lick his mental wounds. Meanwhile, Mo Tianliao carried the cat back to his guest room to wait for their meal, but before they could eat, Shidi sent for them.

“Besides the divine artifact, what else do you need to complete the work?” Shidi sat on his throne with a jade slip in hand—Mo Tianliao assumed it was a message he’d just received.

“A Primordial Stone,” Mo Tianliao answered succinctly.

Primordial Stone was an exceedingly precious material left over from primeval times. Even a small piece cost far more than Meteorfall Stone. The primordial beginning is the origin of spiritual energy.[8] Unlike the typical magical treasures that consumed the user’s spiritual energy, artifacts forged with Primordial Stone could absorb the spiritual energy of the natural world on their own, making them effectively inexhaustible.

Shidi frowned. “That’s all?” Although Primordial Stone was precious, it was hardly unobtainable. In fact, Shidi had some in his demon

palace. But if it was this simple, why hadn't anyone completed the forging for all these years? Hadn't that useless Ding asshole from Liuyun Sect spent over a century researching it?

"And the seventy-two spell arrays my father passed on to me," Mo Tianliao added with an innocent smile.

At the mention of spell arrays, Shidi could feel a headache coming on. He'd always believed brute force and raw strength were all that mattered. There was no need to waste time or energy researching those scribbles. He could put all that time drawing squiggles to better use mastering hundreds of martial arts moves to beat his opponent. Whenever he watched Duantian draw spell arrays, his head hurt, but the guy really liked to draw them in his presence.

"This one just needs another defensive spell array." Lord Duantian pointed to the newly forged treasure artifact. "You can go back and draw it yourself."

"Nah, you draw it." Shidi felt dizzy at the sight of those complicated patterns.

Lord Duantian raised an eyebrow. "That will cost you extra."

"Then so be it." Shidi thumped his chest. "You think I can't afford it?"

And that was how Lord Shidi had become Lord Duantian's regular customer. Shidi found it fantastic that Duantian could make whatever he wanted as long as he paid for it. Duantian thought it marvelous that he could simply make up any item description, and Shidi would pay without question…

Seventy-two spell arrays that were the exclusive technique of array master Duantian—no one could learn all that even if you gave them a decade to do it. Shidi promptly abandoned any idea of studying them himself and patted his “nephew” on the shoulder. “There’s an auction in two days at Bahuang City. We should leave now.”

“Wait.” Mo Tianliao stopped Shidi from taking out a flying ship right there and then. “We need to make some preparations.”

The journey from Shidi’s demon palace to Bahuang City would take a day by flying ship. Shidi and his subordinates practiced inedia, but Mo Tianliao and His Feline Lordship hadn’t eaten yet.

And so, Lord Shidi sat in his luxurious flying ship and had the maidservants pour wine while he looked at these two undignified figures sitting across from him.

Mo Tianliao had the demon palace maidservants prepare a feast consisting of roasted chicken, fried fish, boiled shrimp, steamed crabs, and various snacks. Man and cat both stuffed themselves with food, while the lion opposite them kept licking his nose as he watched them. As a high-level soul beast, he’d always eaten animal-feed pills. His master insisted that was more refined, and gorging on large chunks of meat every day was what wild beasts did. But…even a noble spirit beast like Pawpaw was eating meat. Why couldn’t he?

Gimme, gimme, gimme…

The lion swallowed his drool. He inched forward a little when his master wasn’t looking. Then a little more.

Mo Tianliao cracked open a crab, heated it with fire from his palm, peeled off the crab meat, and fed it to the little ball of fur on his lap. He

finished up the crab leg and turned to take the roast chicken, but his arm knocked against something furry. Startled, he turned and saw a massive lion head looming beside him, drooling over the roasted chicken.

“Get back here!” Shidi shouted when he realized his demonic companion had gone over to beg for food when he wasn’t looking. How embarrassing! Raising a hand in the form of a claw, he used a phantom palm to haul Nightmare back through the air.

The lion flailed as he flew back to his master’s hand. He bared his fangs at him in displeasure.

Shidi tossed the lion an animal-feed pill. The lion batted it away and continued baring his fangs at his master.

Feed me meat! Feed me meat! Feed me meat!

“Feed me meat” echoed in Shidi’s consciousness—a message conveyed from pet to master through the blood pact. Shidi’s face twisted in anger. Was this how a blood pact was supposed to be used?!

Ignoring the bickering master and servant across from them, Mo Tianliao fed His Feline Lordship, then cradled him in his arms and stroked his fur to lull him to sleep. He could honestly spend the entire journey stroking that sleek fur and never get bored. Once His Feline Lordship fell asleep, though, he took out his knife and started carving. His inventory bracelet contained some small magical artifacts that required only minor modifications and an array or two to boost their power significantly.

Shidi watched him draw the arrays with practiced ease, just like how Duantian used to draw them, and nodded in approval. He could entrust him with forging the divine artifact with peace of mind. “My dear nephew, can

you really forge the divine artifact, given that you're currently at the foundation establishment stage?"

"Of course not." Mo Tianliao smiled, and before Shidi could speak, he added, "My father was the one who forged the divine artifact. All it's lacking is the final step. Although I'm rather lacking myself, I can still manage it if I put all my effort into it."

Hearing this, Shidi felt even more reassured. If this kid had thumped his chest and bragged he *could* forge a divine artifact, he wouldn't have believed him. If even a cultivator at the foundation establishment stage could forge a divine artifact, Duantian would never have been hunted down and killed.

It was already night when the flying ship arrived in Bahuang City.

Cultivators of the unorthodox path mostly gathered in the southern part of the Taixuan continent, which was hotter. Even at night, the brightly lit city bustled with activity. The usual shops had already shuttered for the night, but certain establishments were just getting started.

Orthodox cultivators' cities resembled the capital cities of the mortal world. Few ventured out at night, and there were no disreputable businesses. It was a different story for the unorthodox path. Scattered among the bustling establishments were taverns, gambling houses, and even a brothel. Yup, a brothel—an unusual sight in the cultivation world.

Bahuang City fell under the joint jurisdiction of several demon lords. The various powers competing for dominance created the perfect environment for all sorts of establishments to flourish.

Music filled the air in the brightly lit three-story building. Colorfully dressed women stood at the entrance, beckoning to the passersby. These

women were all cultivators below the core formation stage, and many had a physical constitution that made them suitable as vessels—it would've been a challenge for them to make progress in their own cultivation, but they were perfect for other people to improve their own through dual cultivation.

A signboard hung at the top of the building, with the words *The Carefree Pavilion* written in a bold flourish.

The unorthodox path had a slightly different naming convention from the orthodox path. The whole of Bahuang City was essentially a huge marketplace, with the various establishments taking on *Carefree* as part of their names. So Carefree Pavilion was a brothel, Carefree Tavern was…a tavern, and Carefree Den was a gambling den. Apparently, Bahuang City had been founded several thousand years ago by an orthodox cultivator who went by Xiaoyao-zhenren—"the Carefree Perfected One"—but, for some reason, it had ended up becoming the largest city of the unorthodox path.

Mo Tianliao looked at the Carefree Pavilion signboard. He had carved those characters himself, and there was an expulsion spell array that would prevent anyone with murderous intent from entering.

"Never seen anything like this, huh?" Shidi noticed Mo Tianliao looking and smiled knowingly, putting an arm around his shoulder. "Let's go. I'll show you around."

"That won't be necessary…" But before Mo Tianliao could stop him, Shidi dragged him inside. The loyal Nightmare followed them up the stairs, while the maidservants and subordinates headed straight to the demon lord's manor in the city.

It was as bright as daylight inside the building. The air was full of music, with courtesans singing in the hall, adding to the clamor of sound.

The noise woke the fluffy little creature in Mo Tianliao's arms. He poked out his head. When he saw where they were, he scratched Mo Tianliao on the jaw. *Insolent disciple! What is this place?!*

"Ow!" Mo Tianliao quickly held onto His Feline Lordship, who was about to climb out and beat him up. To Shidi, he said, "Pawpaw can't stand the noise. I think—" …*We should leave now*.

Shidi cut him off before he could finish. "Of course we won't remain in such a noisy area." He made his way to a private room upstairs.

These private rooms were extremely luxurious. Colorful plush cushions covered the floor and sheer curtains hung throughout, creating an air of extravagance and elegance. Shidi ordered fine wine, and the brothel's madam came over to pour it for him.

The madam was an attractive middle-aged woman who laughed when she saw them. "What an honor to have my lord grace us with your presence! We just purchased a few girls and two good-looking boys. Would you like…" She glanced suggestively at the tall, handsome Nightmare standing behind Shidi in his human form.

The lion glared at the madam. *Why are you looking at me?!*

Shidi laughed and nudged Mo Tianliao with his elbow. "Want anything, my dear nephew?" As he spoke, a thought occurred to him, and he gave Mo Tianliao an assessing look, his eyes roaming thoughtfully over his body.

"No thanks, I'll just drink my wine." Mo Tianliao was too preoccupied with appeasing His Feline Lordship to pay Shidi any attention. Mo Tianliao had visited this place in his previous life, since some matters were more conveniently discussed in such an establishment, but Pawpaw

disliked the scent of powder and rouge and threw a tantrum every time Mo Tianliao brought him here. It was even worse if he came without bringing him and returned home reeking of makeup.

Shidi nodded in understanding and had the madam bring up several fair-skinned girls. Once the madam left, he wiped the wine off his lips and turned to Mo Tianliao. “I was so intent on bringing you here to broaden your horizons that I forgot to ask—can you actually get your dick up?”

Mo Tianliao’s face instantly darkened. *This impertinent buffoon! If I don’t bleed him dry, my name’s not Mo Tianliao!*

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: There’s an extra charge if you want to make it elegant.

Big Hammer: Money’s not a problem. Buy, buy, buy.

Woodworker: There’s an option to include a spell array that adds cool effects to your fights.

Big Hammer: Money’s not a problem. Buy, buy, buy.

Woodworker: And—

Big Hammer: Money’s not a problem. Buy, buy, buy.

Woodworker: I haven’t even said anything.

Big Hammer: All this talk is making me dizzy. Just tell me how much to pay.

Woodworker: *speechless*

Chapter 44:
White Fox

SHIDI WAS SPEAKING when he paused, his raised wine cup going still in midair. Then he formed a defensive barrier around himself and continued drinking as if nothing had happened. Nightmare turned to look at the window.

A man in white covered in wounds crashed through and fell to the floor just beside Mo Tianliao's feet.

Mo Tianliao moved his feet aside as Shidi grabbed the man by the back of his collar and hauled him up, revealing a striking face—by mortal standards, he appeared to be around seventeen or eighteen.

"Urgh…" The man had briefly lost consciousness, but now he opened his eyes. Met with the sight of Shidi's face, he looked around frantically—and when he saw the curious lion in human clothing behind Shidi and the little furry head poking out of Mo Tianliao's collar, the young man clutched at Shidi's muscular forearm and pleaded, "Please, sir, I'm about to be auctioned off. I was trying to escape. Please…"

Pawpaw pushed himself up against Mo Tianliao's collar and quietly watched the young man in the bloodstained white robe, his glass-colored eyes narrowing ever so slightly. He could tell this was a spirit beast who had only just evolved into a human form—he was still pretty weak.

Nightmare said nothing, but he nudged his master from behind to remind him not to strangle the life out of the guy.

“He barged into the Carefree Pavilion. Check it out.” A clamor of voices rose from downstairs. Shidi could hear them clearly with his divine senses.

The various powers in Bahuang City generally extended some degree of courtesy to each other. If they wanted to apprehend someone, they would go through the proper channels—which, in this situation, meant entering through the front door to negotiate with the madam, a process that would take time. Even so, it was too late to escape.

The young man gritted his teeth and kneeled on the floor. “Sir, I’m an evolved spirit beast. Since you’ve picked me up, I’m yours now. Please take me in.” This burly and intimidating man radiated strength and power, so he should be capable of protecting him. Besides, he already had a demonic companion with whom he’d signed a blood pact, so he wouldn’t do anything to him for the time being. He just had to find an opportunity to make a run for it later. More importantly, he had sensed the aura of a great, ancient spirit from outside earlier, which was why he had burst in so recklessly. Since it wasn’t this man’s demonic companion, perhaps—

“Spirit beast?” Shidi’s interest was piqued. He touched the young man’s delicate face and pinched his chin for a better look. “This is a spirit beast?” he asked his lion, turning to look at him.

“Yeah,” Nightmare answered, twitching his ears. “The people from the auction house will be here soon. Do you want him?”

“The law in Taixuan is that whoever catches it owns it,” Mo Tianliao chimed in calmly as he stroked the little head in his arms. His meaning was all too clear: Only an idiot would pass up such an opportunity.

“My lord, pardon the intrusion,” the madam said as she pushed the door open. There were several burly demonic cultivators behind her holding Spirit-Restraining Chains. When they saw Shidi, though, they didn’t dare to act rashly. They stood at attention to pay their respects.

“This gentleman here is Lord Shidi,” the madam said with a smile. “My lord, these people are from the Carefree Auction House.”

“Greetings, my lord.” The man in front lowered himself to one knee and bowed, glancing at the young man who was still clutching Shidi’s arm. “This is merchandise from the auction house. We apologize for disturbing you—we will take him away now.” He moved toward the young man.

The spirit beast trembled in fear and refused to let go of Shidi’s arm. His upturned eyes brimmed with tears as he looked pleadingly at Shidi.

Lord Shidi reveled in the gaze of someone so dependent on him. “I found him, so he’s mine now,” he grunted.

“Uh… Please pardon us, my lord, but the auction house bought him for a princely sum. If we can’t take him back…” The man looked put on the spot. This evolved spirit beast was incredibly valuable, and he was the highlight of the auction tonight. They couldn’t afford to take responsibility for losing him.

“A masterless spirit beast belongs to whoever finds it.” Mo Tianliao spoke up coolly. “No matter how powerful your auction house is, it cannot violate the law of Taixuan.”

The group of men began to sweat nervously. When Mo Tianliao put it like that, it made it sound like they were bullying Lord Shidi—an unthinkable offense. This demon lord was a great master at the soul transformation stage. He could easily crush them with a finger, and it

wouldn’t even be worth his effort. Even if they had powerful backing, they wouldn’t have the audacity to offend him!

The unorthodox path wasn’t the same as the orthodox path, where you could just announce your sect and elders in times of danger and hope the other would respect them and spare you on their account. On the demonic path, strength and power were king. If you were weak and offended the wrong person, you would be killed without recourse.

“Hah!” Shidi slammed his palm down on the crystal wine table, shattering it into pieces. (Mo Tianliao covered the cat with his sleeve to protect it from stray fragments.) The intimidating presence of the demon lord instantly filled the room, forcing everyone to their knees on the ground. The spirit beast, who was already injured to begin with, coughed out a mouthful of blood. But Mo Tianliao’s divine soul was stronger than Shidi’s; he continued to watch the show, unaffected.

“It hasn’t been easy for you to chase him this far. Here’s a reward for your trouble.” Shidi grinned sharply and threw a handful of spiritual stones at the group. “Now, scram!”

Pelted by the shower of spiritual stones, the group silently picked them up. They had no ground to stand on. Finders keepers—that was indeed the rule when it came to spirit beasts. And besides, the auction house really didn’t want to offend a demon lord. Taking the money, the men slunk away dejectedly.

Seeing them leave, the injured young man finally passed out and collapsed, turning into a snow-white fox in a flash of light.

Where had he seen this fox before? Mo Tianliao frowned, suddenly remembering the girl auctioned at Six Harmonies Bazaar. She had also been

a snow fox. Mo Tianliao wondered if they were related.

Shidi held up the fox, but he didn't know where to put him. In the end he tossed him to Nightmare behind him. Nightmare caught him, but he didn't know where to put him either. They were both spirit beasts, so carrying him in his arms felt weird. In the end, he transformed back into a lion and tucked the fox into his thick mane. The white fox was only about a foot long, so he wouldn't fall off the lion's broad back.

Not long after, the madam returned, smiling as if nothing had happened, and introduced a group of attractive girls to Shidi.

Most of the female cultivators at the Carefree Pavilion had the physical constitution and body of a vessel, which meant they had dual or multiple spiritual attributes that clashed with each other and made cultivation difficult. Major sects would balk at taking them in as disciples, but they worked perfectly as dual cultivation partners for other cultivators.

Some people specifically bred and raised these vessels to give away as gifts to others, so it wasn't a surprise that the Carefree Pavilion groomed them to sell. Of course, some female cultivators with vessel bodies voluntarily came here to earn spiritual stones so they could continue their own cultivation. After all, being privately kept as a vessel meant they were still at their masters' mercy and subjected to their masters' whims and fancies. If they came out here to do business instead, they would at least get tangible spiritual stones to show for it.

"Achoo—" The cat in Mo Tianliao's arms sneezed at the scent of powder and rouge. Immediately throwing a fit, he swiped at Mo Tianliao again and started struggling in his arms.

Mo Tianliao rose. “Pawpaw can’t stand this place. I’ll take him back first. Please enjoy yourself.” Seeing Shidi’s knowing and sympathetic expression grated on his nerves. He left with the cat in his arms.

Mo Tianliao naturally remembered the way back to Shidi’s manor in Bahuang City—it was just around the corner.

The maidservant led Mo Tianliao to the guest room and left. Once Mo Tianliao had set up the protective barrier, the cat in his arms jumped out and transformed into his cold, beautiful shizun. He shoved Mo Tianliao, who was standing near him, away.

“Go bathe.” He covered his nose with a fair, slender hand and frowned at Mo Tianliao with disgust in his eyes.

Mo Tianliao had no choice but to comply. A couple of steps later, he remembered his cat hadn’t bathed either. He turned back to him. “Shall I bathe you too?” As soon as the words left his mouth, he realized how inappropriate they were—he quickly fled at the sight of his master’s stunned expression.

“Insolent disciple!” Snapping to his senses, Qingtong flung a phantom palm out at him.

Mo Tianliao crossed his arms, forming a defensive barrier. As the barrier shattered from the impact, he ducked into the bathroom.

D-damn it! Pressing his thin lips together, Qingtong transformed back into a cat and jumped onto the bed, where he began to massacre the bedsheet. Mo Tianliao returned fresh and clean from the bath to the sight of His Feline Lordship dominating the shredded bed.

He combed his fingers through his hair with fire energy, instantly drying it. Then he shamelessly jumped onto the bed and squeezed in with

His Feline Lordship. “Shidi won’t be back tonight, so why don’t you chat with me?” Mo Tianliao nudged the little cat, who had his back to him again. “I’m all clean now. Here, smell me.”

Whack! A snowy paw swatted away Mo Tianliao’s grabby hand. There was a flash of white light, and the cat transformed again into a gorgeous man lying on his side on the bed.

Seeing his silly disciple grinning ingratiatingly at him, he slowly moved in and sniffed at his temple. The stench of powder and rouge was gone; in its place was the faint fragrance of plants and trees.

This close, Mo Tianliao could feel his soft breaths brushing against the side of his face, as well as the faint heat radiating from his body. Without thinking, he swallowed and turned to look at him.

Cold, beautiful eyes gazed back at him as those lips parted to reveal a clear, melodious voice that seemed to echo from the deepest recesses of time**.** “What do you want to talk about?”

Spellbound, Mo Tianliao inched closer and stopped a few inches away from those pale, thin lips. He pinched his own thigh under the blanket and cast around for a topic. “That fox. Don’t you think it was similar to the one we saw at Six Harmonies Bazaar?”

“Yeah,” Qingtong answered simply. He didn’t see anything unusual about Mo Tianliao leaning so close—after all, this was how they usually interacted. However, seeing this face so close made his hands itch with the desire to scratch at it. He couldn’t resist—His Feline Lordship in human form reached out to place his fingers on Mo Tianliao’s face and gently curled them.

Mo Tianliao stiffened and went still as those slightly cool fingers lightly scratched away at his face, the ticklish sensation making his heart itch too. His mouth went dry as an uncontrollable heat coursed through his entire body.

“Qingtong…” Mo Tianliao breathed in a hoarse voice. He wanted to warn his master to stay away from him. Even if he was a block of wood now, he was still a man. He couldn’t withstand such temptation. If this continued, there was no telling what he might do!

Those cold, beautiful eyes slowly narrowed. Qingtong pushed away the face before him. “Insolent disciple! How dare you call your shizun by

name!”

The inexplicable romantic tension between them shattered just as suddenly as it had formed.

MINI EXTRA

When Can We Have a Normal Romance?

Woodworker: Shizun, your lips look so sweet.

Shizun: Insolent disciple! Are you thinking of biting me?! *bites first to get the upper hand*

Woodworker: QAQ

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post

VOLUME 2

Character Guide & Glossary

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

MO TIANLIAO 莫天寥: A master artificer known as the Venerable Demon Lord Duantian in his previous life. Now reborn in the body of a… divine tree.

QINGTONG 清潼: One of the three sanctum masters of Woyun Sect, and the human form of Mo Tianliao's cat, Pawpaw.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

WOYUN SECT

TIANLANG 天琅: Sect leader and one of the three sanctum masters of Woyun Sect.

XUANJI 玄机: One of the three sanctum masters of Woyun Sect.

MENGHU 孟虎: Chief disciple under the tutelage of Qingtong. His name sounds like "fierce tiger." Qingtong's nickname for him is Chubby (大胖).

YANLIE 炎烈: Chief disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader.

ZIMO 紫陌: Second disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader.

BAILUO 白落: Third disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader.

MOXIONG 墨雄: Fourth disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader.

LANGZI 琅梓: Ffith disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader.

YUANHAI 元海: Chief disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji .

HUAQING 花情: Second disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji. Known as the Flaming Flower Elixirist.

YULI 玉离: Third disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji.

CHENG XI 程溪: newly accepted disciple from the same batch as Mo Tianliao, no formal title/rank as yet.

SUHENG 素恒: Second-generation disciple of Menghu.

SUWEN 素问: Second-generation disciple of Menghu.

CHIFENG 赤峰: Second-generation disciple; head disciple of Yanlie.

CHISHAN 赤珊: Second-generation disciple of Yanlie.

CHIYUAN 赤垣: Second-generation disciple of Yanlie.

LIUYUN SECT

DING HU 丁户: Elder Ding; specializes in artifact forging.

DING ZIJIN 丁子金: Eldest son and heir of Elder Ding.

QINYUN SECT

YUNSONG 云松: An elder of the sect.

DEMONIC PATH

SHIDI 弑地: Nicknamed Dachui or Big Hammer (大锤). One of the demon lords of the unorthodox path. His name means “Heavenslayer.”

BLACK NIGHTMARE LION 黑魇狮: Shidi’s soul beast. Nightmare for short.

NAME GUIDE

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

DOUBLING: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, e.g., "Mangmang"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning "old." Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning "little" or "younger," which can be added before names or titles for juniors like "xiaodi." Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally "son" or "child." Always a suffix. Can sometimes be a fixed part of a person's name, rather than just an affectionate suffix.

Family

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "elder brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIBO: The elder male fellow disciple of one’s teacher.

SHIFU: Teacher or master. Literal meaning is “martial father.” For one’s master in one’s own sect.

SHISHU: Martial uncle. For junior martial siblings of the speaker’s master, including women.

SHIZHI: Martial nephew or niece. For disciples of the speaker’s martial sibling.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIJIE: Older martial sister, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHIZU: In this novel, the teacher of one’s teacher.

ZHENREN: “Perfected one,” a Daoist spiritual master.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

x: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

CULTIVATION: A central element of the xianxia genre, cultivation is the pursuit of immortality through refining one's spiritual and martial ability. Cultivation in fiction is inspired by both Daoist and Buddhist tradition and cultivators are often explicitly Daoist or Buddhist. In *The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post*, the orthodox cultivation world includes both Daoist and Buddhist sects, while unorthodox cultivators who do not follow any such rules are known as demonic cultivators. Animals can use cultivation to gain human form over time, like the spirit beasts and soul beasts in this novel.

CULTIVATION STAGES: Cultivators usually progress through distinct stages as they grow more powerful. From lowest to highest, these are qi refining, foundation establishment, core formation, nascent soul, and soul transformation, with the final stage being ascension to heaven. When a cultivator progresses from one stage to the next, they undergo a heavenly tribulation.

DANTIAN: The place in the body where qi is concentrated and refined, and where a cultivator forms their core. Physically, the dantian is located in the lower abdomen.

DUAL CULTIVATION: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. The term also be

used as a simple euphemism for sex.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

SPELL ARRAY: A magic circle created by inscribing words or symbols on an object to create a lasting effect.

About the Author

Lv Ye Qian He is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City, a member of the China Writers Association, a council member of the Internet Writers Association of Henan, and vice-chair of the Internet Writers Association of Zhengzhou. She's been writing online fiction for fifteen years, specializing in cute and feel-good stories. Her notable works include *The Wife Comes First* and *Mr. Dior*. Her works are popular both in China and abroad, and many have already been adapted into TV dramas, animated series, comics, and radio dramas.

Footnotes

Chapter 4: Qingtong

[1] Shixiong is a term for an older male disciple of one's own generation; shibo refers to an older disciple of one's master.

Chapter 5: Shizun

[2] Shishu is a term for a younger peer of one's master.

Chapter 6: Pawpaw

[3] Shizhi is a term for a disciple of one's peer.

[4] Shizu is a term for the master of one's own master.

Chapter 8: Good Night's Sleep

[5] Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu, Chapter 77

Chapter 28: Chaojun the Super Handsome

[6] "Chaojun" means "super handsome," whereas "Yingjun" merely means "handsome."

Chapter 35: Six Harmonies

[7] From Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching.

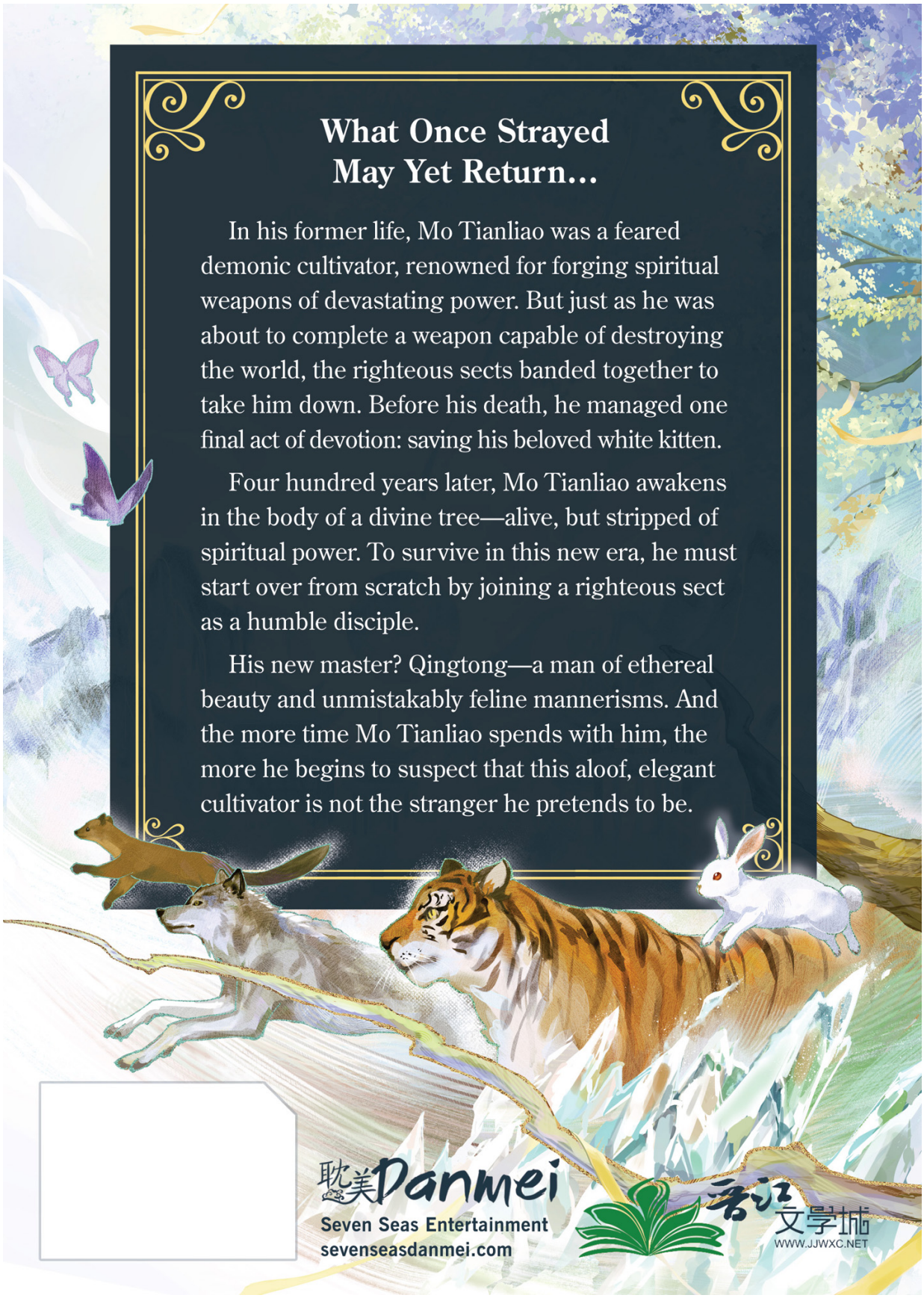
Chapter 43: Brothel

[8] From The Book of Lieh-Tzu.

"The Supreme Beginning is the origin of qi;
*the Supreme Origin is the beginning of form."**

*Yukou, Lie. 5th century. *Liezi*

Lv Ye Qian He


What Once Strayed
May Yet Return…
In his former life, Mo Tianliao was a feared demonic cultivator, renowned for forging spiritual weapons of devastating power. But just as he was about to complete a weapon capable of destroying the world, the righteous sects banded together to take him down. Before his death, he managed one final act of devotion: saving his beloved white kitten.
Four hundred years later, Mo Tianliao awakens in the body of a divine tree—alive, but stripped of spiritual power. To survive in this new era, he must start over from scratch by joining a righteous sect as a humble disciple.
His new master? Qingtong—a man of ethereal beauty and unmistakably feline mannerisms. And the more time Mo Tianliao spends with him, the more he begins to suspect that this aloof, elegant cultivator is not the stranger he pretends to be.
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